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University of Alberta

Shimmer

by

William N. Roszell

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 2003

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Shimmer submitted by William N. Roszell in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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03-09-23
Date

Abstract

This piece is the first chapter, "Pro", of a larger project entitled *Shimmer*. It is a multi-dimensional work of fiction incorporating several levels of speculation and symbolic thinking across physics, grammatology, literary theory, psychoanalysis and philosophy. It includes elements of history, poetry, and visual art and the modern tradition of the novel within a narrative frame.

Shimmer is a destabilized condition produced of crisis and the imminence of danger, and one exemplified by the 'out-of body' experience of people in trauma. "Pro" is the (shaky) history of the Kelly clan and the protagonist's encounter with shimmering. It sets the stage for the visual, linguistic, and narratological representations of the established sites of instability in intercourse and psychology, discourse and ideology – the systems and structures of power (on) which we reflect.

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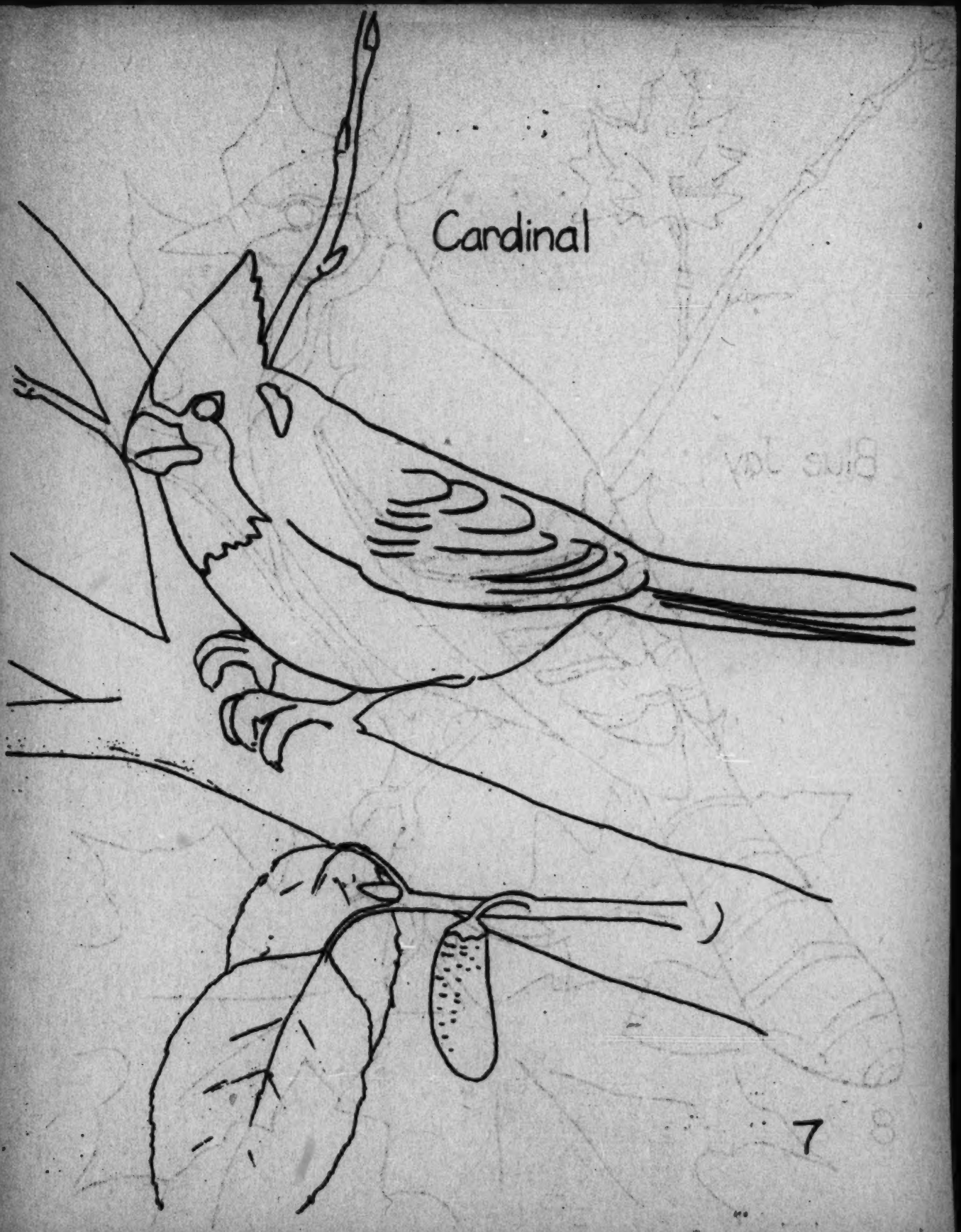
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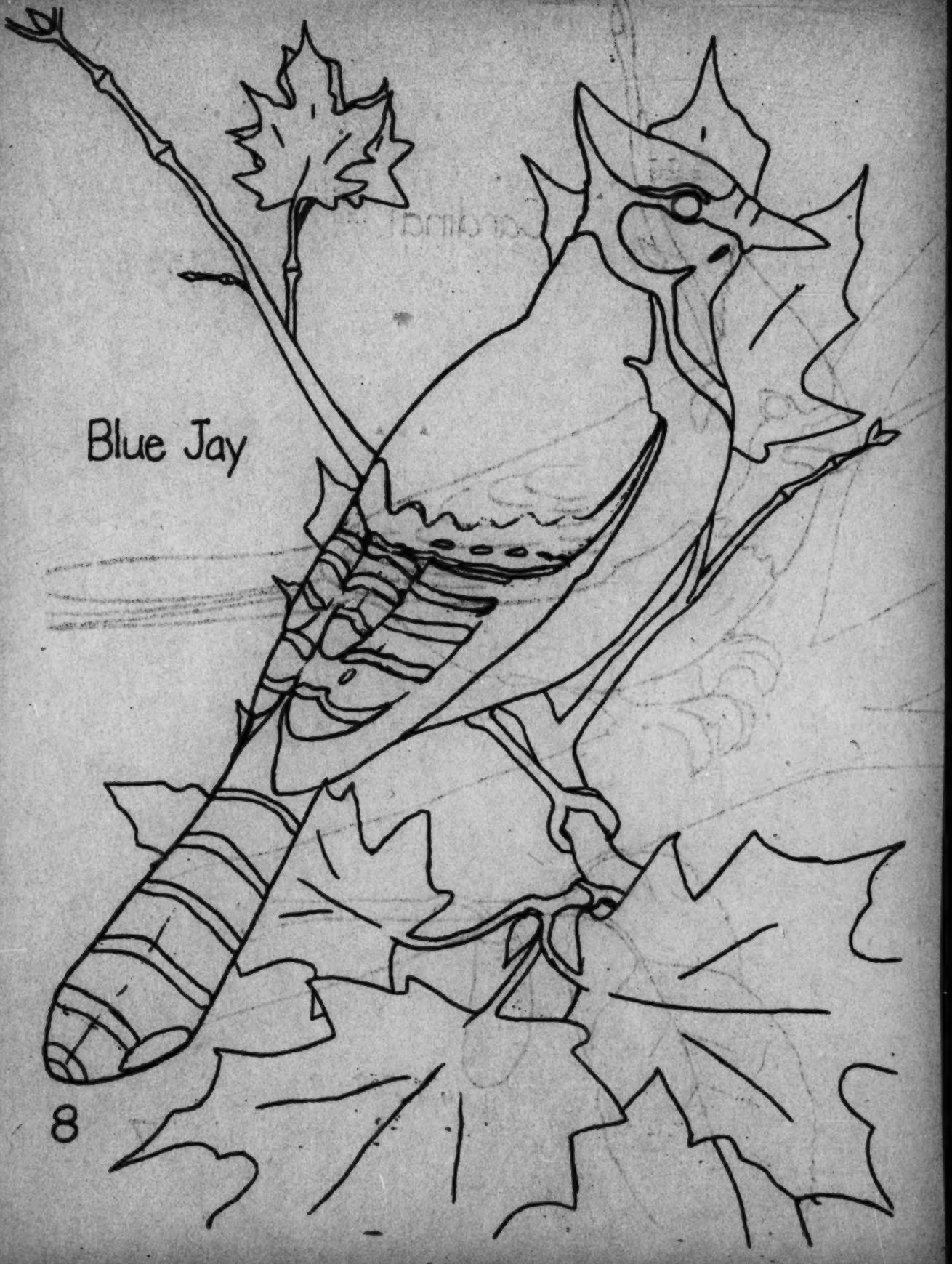
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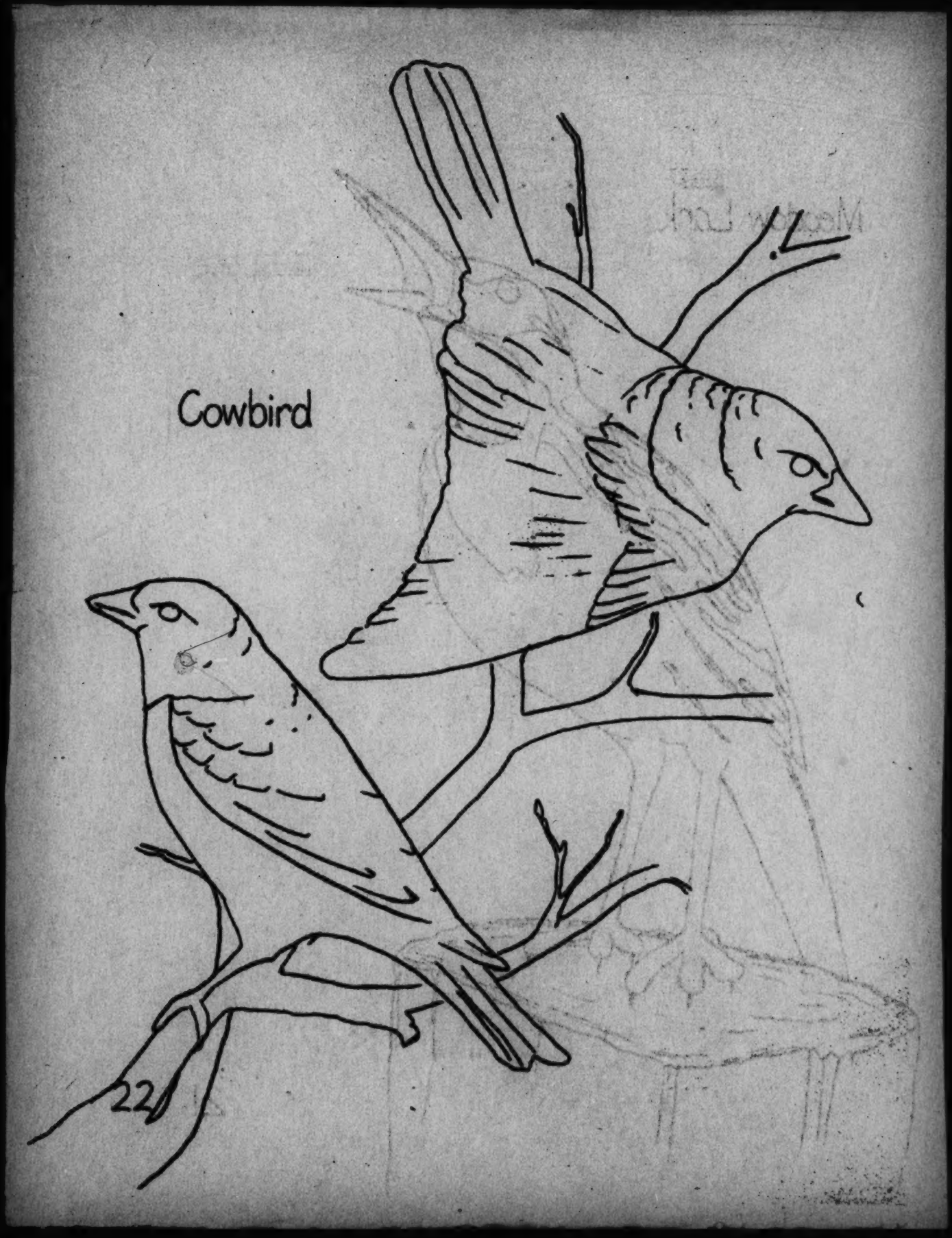
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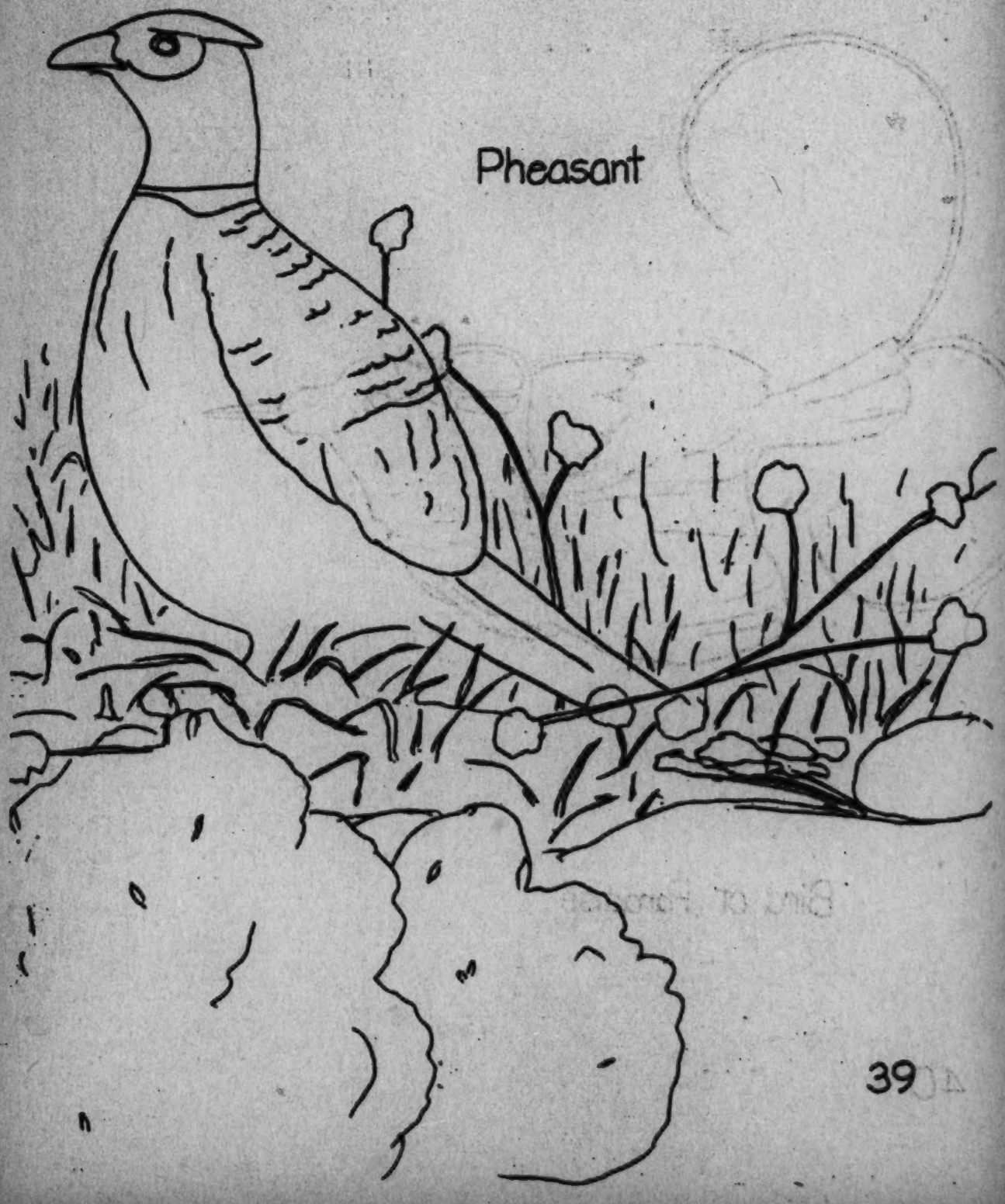
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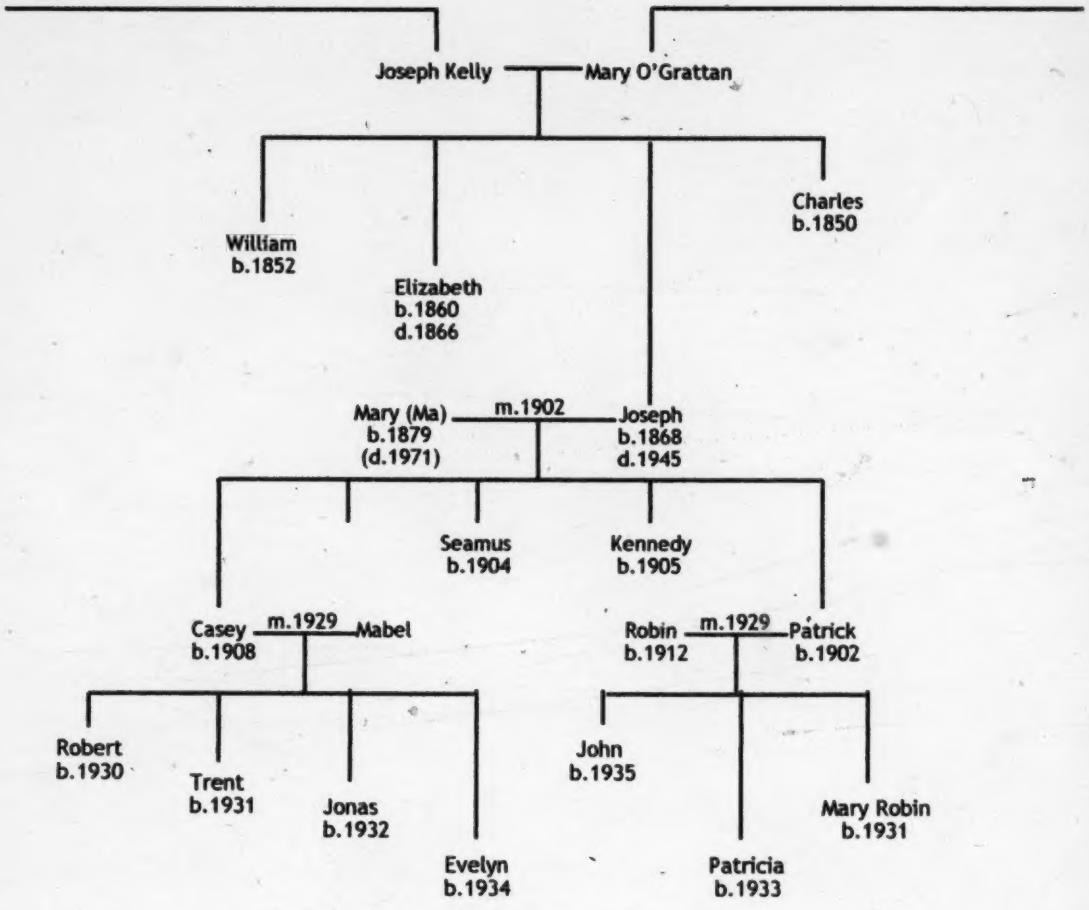

The Kelly Tree c.1950

Kenny said it was blood.

And that was always the bet, wasn't it.

I could see that, I could see that now as I lay dying. I could feel the stony finger tips pressing for the bone in my cheek, in my forehead, past the spongy tissue. I could feel the cool pattern of their collective knead.

Ponderously, wonderously, I began to recognize the view: a horizon… a vertical horizon. To the left, around the aggregate pebble that rose from the pavement, I could see closely the sharp tiny rocks that lay sprinkled in the valleys. I could feel them clinging to my skin. I could smell petroleum, the scent lingering heavily somewhere behind my eyes. And I could see those little rocks licked up on a deep purple swell that rolled almost imperceptibly up the surface. A present pressure occluded the perception of sound, but I was certain that I was on the verge of recalling what had called me here - the appellation disrupted, breathless, just out of memory.

This was an emergency. I knew that. Urgency began to spin itself up, a turbine, its engine impulsive, centripetal. But the insistent force of will could power no response; no lurch extracted my carcass from the suction of the earth. There was only the faintest creep of thick fluid up the horizon as if it were travelling the tube of some great thermometer. Along its flank, on the upside, a blue-green shimmer. And all around, a silence.

Tales appeared, wiggling, pressing, their noses bumping against the membrane of consciousness.

Suddenly I remembered that my life would flash before my very eyes – and of

course there it bloomed. Seriously. But it was Kenny who loomed, dead centre, peering back. He was about ten, I'd guess, his skin ruddy and tanned below a shiny pelt. I noticed the cowlick in his crewcut just left of centre at his hairline and how it looked for all the world like a funnel into his head. Remembering that impression, I collected, too, the picture of realization that followed, settling into his face; it expressed a revelation he didn't yet know as blood, just some connection he'd found in the dream he insisted on sharing.

He didn't know, either, why they came all the way to church in Shirley and he didn't know why his name should make a difference but he knew about Shirley's dog and he certainly knew that it was me he had to tell. "Shirley's dog, Dave, Shirley's dog. It's like treasure. It's like treasure in a pirate show. And that's the dream, hey?… an' your dream too, right, it's your dream there, too."

Who could help but glance. Then look.

Bright with imperative, fervent with concentration, his eyes tugged back at me, drew me to the gaze until all I could see was a gaping, vacuous pupil. Absently, entranced, I pulled a string of mucous I'd snagged from its mooring in my nasal cavity. A tremor, I think. Then, with just the slightest tickle of resistance and without the faintest lurch, I was extracted, and plunged into the vacuate pull.

Even now, I knew he could feel me snaking through him, feel the trickle like a hint of salivation leaking around the hinge of his jaw, seeping along his cheek. And then I could hear him, hear him asking Evelyn when he'd be old enough to meet his father. I could hear the rustle, her smooth pause (her quaking pulse). I could feel the careful settling, the delicate touch of the focus of her attentions.

Pathetically, skirting the safeguards in her keeping, guilt opened her to her only son while a fleeting thrill of panic passed - and in that juncture, I wormed into his mother.

Evelyn was still in all ways severe. Severe enough in her carriage, in her looks – lips and brows dark, full and sharply defined against honey skin; slim neck and straight nose against billows of auburn curls – to reverse the smugly sublime and domineering leering of the local men with a stabbing probe from her own clear grey eyes. Severe enough in her resolve to sever the roots that crept into her craving. And yet she had chosen this lot, in fact was glad to have it, glad to have had Kenny, his conception her agency here.

Our mothers were cousins, part of the Kelly clan: my mom the practical one, Evelyn the beauty. So we shared the Old Man, their grandfather, shared the heritage. And we shared the infamous uncles Kelly even if we'd never really known them. As sharing goes, though, the lion's share seemed Kenny's due, as a matter of course, his being a namesake and all.

Because you see Evelyn knew why Kenny's name made a difference and she knew, too, why they traveled all the way from Congress, east into the hills, to church in Shirley. It had to do with content. It had to do with content and contentment and it even had to do with continents.

Evelyn should have been content. The darling daughter of the Old Man's favourite son, she wanted for nothing. She had always been wrapped in the machine-made clothes and quality cloths of city fabric merchants. Even though it

was a twenty-mile trek to Regina and even though the caustic breath of the Great Depression still lingered on the prairies, Evelyn had had new saddle shoes, new ribbon to tie up her hair on her first day of school.

She had always lived in the big house - the one the Old Man and Ma had built - cloaked in the coolness of its sheltering timbers and snug within the radiance that poured from the hearths of its standing stone foundation. Her father, Casey, was the youngest of the Old Man's boys, but he'd always had designs on the big house. He'd laboured with Patrick, the eldest, to erect a second house on an adjacent quarter, his wages the wager that the middle brothers would soon be leaving the big house, even while Patrick dawdled around the new one.

With his speculation substantiated, like a prediction confirmed, Casey wasted no time in filling the vacated space with a wife and offspring. So Evelyn and the "barbarians" as Ma called them - her three brothers - grew up in the big house. This in spite of Patrick's last-minute efforts to re-install himself by procuring, with all haste, a wife.

But Patrick's sudden expedience did pay off and found him a fetching little thing in the person of my grandmother, Robin Cauldron, from down Weyburn way. By all accounts, the Cauldrons were just teeming with girls and the fiery Robin - ever deemed the subordinate to the elder sister, always the nurse, the seamstress, the nanny to the younger five – couldn't wait to get out from under. And as Patrick's wife, she was soon on top of things around the Kelly place.

Casey, however, had had Mabel, Kenny's grandmother, waiting in the wings it seems. So he hurried her home, arriving first, he and his cow-eyed bride, and

they settled right in (until, some years after the Old Man died, it seemed as though Ma were a visitor amongst them).

The immediate result of all this jiggery-pokery, as Evelyn would say, was older brother Bobby. "Daddy simply beat diligent Uncle Pat to the mark." And one Robert Kelly was subsequently plucked from the fecund Mabel.

Patrick and Robin (bringing up the rear) responded a few months later, springing forth a little girl in early 1931. It somehow hadn't occurred to Patrick that the wee critter might emerge female and in any case he'd been distracted, wrestling with the propriety of namesakes - whether to name the child Patrick Joseph after himself or Joseph Patrick after the Old Man. Because he still hadn't given up hope of returning some day to the big house, somehow claiming his inheritance through progeny.

Their daughter was named Mary Robin, after Ma, and Patrick's ambitions were finally snuffed when Casey and Mabel casually produced two more boys before he was able to prod another child from the industrious but less prolific Robin. When it arrived, this child, too, was a girl, my mother, and named Patricia.

Casey and Mabel, now well entrenched in the big house with a full complement of barbarians, were free to bring forth a daughter, which they did. So it was that Evelyn, a beautiful girl, accomplished of Mabel and godsend to Ma, arrived at about the same time as Patrick's stubborn son - in the middle of a depression.

It was the provision from the other uncles that kept the place, though, despite the Old Man's renowned ingenuity and dogged labour provided by Patrick and Casey. Seamus and Kennedy, located between Patrick and Casey, were the middle sons

who'd evacuated the nest just in time to accommodate the new broods. They appeared occasionally out of the veils of drifting dust, come to subsidize the home place and keep Ma supplied with material, including the crimson and vesper satins she used to adorn the hair of little Evelyn.

The leaving itself hadn't been much trouble for the uncles. They'd seen fit to work out of Moose Jaw, some forty-odd miles away, from the time Seamus was seventeen and Kennedy freshly arrived at sixteen. As a result they'd not often been home but every several days or so a new streamer of dust would signal their coming… and the contagion of their energy would drift swiftly into the yard along with their automobile.

They were dashing buggers and well known in the community, always ready to proffer a drink or a quick commentary to a local anecdote. They always had a bit of jingle, dropping a penny, even a nickel now and then on a lucky nephew. They presented themselves more often than when they'd worked out of the place, living at home. And, well into the forties, the occasion of their visits always drew along something marvellous for the nieces Mary Robin and the ribbon girls.

At such times the boys were content just to be around and they'd curtail scuffling in the dirt, excited to be a part of the company. Each one fairly panted after the expressions and mannerisms of the uncles and emulated the men folk in earnest, venturing by a convincing(ly attentive) posture to avoid being (the one) dispatched feeling cur-like (although it wasn't infrequently that an errand was rewarded with a penny).

They'd all taken to calling Patricia and Evelyn the ribbon girls since Evelyn had

taken to sharing the decorations with her cousin, her companion from the new house. Still, it seemed the colours of Ma's choosing were destined increasingly to compliment the developing Evelyn. As her hair deepened to a baritone chestnut, the crimson satin was exacted towards an ever-truer harmony, accented, particularly in summer, by a consistent and soundly flawless wheat-coloured skin. The vesper, too, almost carbon black, softened against the dark granite grey of her eyes until it came to whisper the adamantine sheen in their gloss. And while the colours were less effective against Patricia's sprinkle of freckle and bright blue eyes, their ornament remained an enhancement, served to bind the girls, and to assuage Ma's feeling of guilt. (Daughterless, she spoiled Evelyn.)

Even after the war when Seamus wasn't around, even when they counted on Kennedy alone to carry on the image of the uncles, the girls had their endowments, mainly books and mostly "marvels" of Mary Robin's choosing. These gifts were always ceded to Evelyn since the uncles always arrived first at the big house. Evelyn dutifully delivered the goods across the coulee to the other quarters but it wasn't uncommon that she'd meet the girls crossing the draw. Patricia would be trailing, Mary Robin briskly wiggle-walking, so enamoured as she was of the mission she conceived for herself - a commission, in fact, of brood mother, mentor and chief to the other two. Prominently, no satin danced in her tresses as she preceded Patty and Evy to what she called the haven of solace. Of course, the progressive Mary Robin had long since taken to wearing her hair "up". Mary Robin's haven of solace was formed on a tiny plateau part way down one slope of the coulee that ran between the two places. The haven was framed by a

few low-skirted pines whose boughs ran into the slope on one side and parted on the other to accommodate three or four poplars whose furthest branches in turn extended out past the edge of the plateau where the slope again fell away and where the canopies of two stubby birch trees raced up to meet them. There were few other trees in the little ravine and from the snug cell created within the stand, the girls could look out through the birch canopies to the severe far side, the wheat field standing expansive above it, and to the new place as well. In winter the snow that drifted over the rim of the gully piled up behind the thick brooms of the pines and, at some point, Patty and Evy would carve out a burrow in the bank. Mary Robin then warned of the danger of collapse - and they all dived in. It was deliciously clandestine, with candles for reading and a surprising warmth in the gloom, clapped within the white, insular layer.

The boys seldom ventured into the coulee except in pursuit of some creature fainting with panic or in returning from the Qu'Appelle Valley that ran just north of the houses. In winter, knife-edged, hard-packed snowdrifts that towered, as if yelling into the stark hinterland, jutting from the caragana weatherstops that framed the yards - formed by the very wind their construction opposed - made ideal sites for the boys' forts. But no fort survived more than a full day's battles. For the girls, a refuge constituted not so much a respite from barging across the prairies like their brothers but a spot where tea could be feigned and the great works savoured - under Mary Robin's tutelage, of course. Mary Robin siphoned this tutelage from her gentle mentor, the teacher in Edenwold, taking care to then disseminate the same in turn, liberally spinning it out like gauze over the other

two. Haplessly, until they reached grade nine, Evy and Patty were relegated to the little Poplar Bluff school to the west and consigned to its curriculum. Consequently Mary Robin regaled them with the sumptuous details of bus travel and the splendours of the Edenwold school, and salved their deprivations with readings from hand-written copy of selections from the elegant Mrs. Hubbard's several volumes of complete works.

To each his own (sigh), she lauded them all. And from among the teacher's titles, she was introduced early on to one of John Milton. She copied the entire text of *Paradise Lost*, supplemented it with Mrs. Hubbard's commentary, and added a touch of her own. So from the cozy haven-of-solace-cum-bower-of-asylum the girls spent several summer hours examining the crispy western plains, laid on with Satan, Sin, and Death and the admiring prose of Fanny Hubbard (nee Morland from a fine family in the southern United States of America): "As the brook slips gurgling over rock and rush, so tinkles Milton's pretty verse across our consciousness: swift, enticing, sweet, delighting, liquid line invites. We drink him in." And of the slightly less exotic Mary Robin: "When affected by none quite so lazy as the blaze of summer nor hotter than the fall of desire, by Grace we find nothing cooler than the icy spring of inspiration nor none so pure and clean as the winter of contentment."

This, too, served to bind the girls, this fabric of mists that indulged their sense of intimacy, invited their participation, and brought a weight to the light summer air. From the same vantage point in the bower they could see the uncles, or at least Uncle Kennedy, and David's grandfather… that is, my granddad, Patrick, and

perhaps Casey, too, ambling up the west side of the draw that divided in half the little cleft peninsula that protruded into the valley. On the east quarter stood the big house, and so the men would be headed over for the new place. By now their voices would be just a shade louder, a trace higher in pitch; each would grimace less as he took a cut from the bottle. The boys would be hanging off just a bit, dusty little creatures, bright with anticipation, minding the scene through muck-rimmed eyes, hoping to catch the scraps of a dirty joke or a good bout of aunting. Aunting was better. Aunting was rather like ranting but without the harsh voice. And Aunt Robin was especially susceptible to the condition. She'd be glad, at first, to see the men all full of good humour, glad for the attentions and a change of conversation. But when they began to settle into her kitchen and turn their talk to their own counsel, her contributions would seem awkward, more and more stilted, and she would become increasingly less vocal. As their tones became louder and stupider, she would pace, her gait growing stiffer, jerkier, clomping; her head would bob, chicken-like, with emphatic punctuation at the jab of a blurted off-colour phrase, particularly if the children were near. And the boys, huddled outside under the window, would conspire, giggling, in undertones, wagging their heads, attempting to conjure a spectacle: "...they're in for't now, they're in for't now...." The men would clatter with laughter and Robin would shift and straighten her garments, rattle a pan, spirit a pie from the pantry, clang a few pots. When these things failed to interrupt the spell around the men, when it in fact grew tighter and they proceeded to twisting wrists, a flash of danger would grope her. She would imagine them wrestling, picture the imminent destruction

in her kitchen. Deliberately she would distend herself, planting, and she would then turn to them, fierce-eyed, clap together two pieces of precious Weldwood stoneware, and let the dishes fall four feet or so onto the floor.

The boys knew that on a good afternoon she would pull herself erect and break into a full-voiced, spittin', cussin' rant – but that almost never happened. Usually the men would come to, exchange quick glances meaning, "Oh, thunder and shit, boys, she's gonna blow," and attempt, with expedience, to bring nonchalance to a manic saunter, chatting and chin rubbing while, eyes adart, buggering off back to the big house.

Treating their retreat as a rendezvous hatched of their own election, the men swaggered and spoke with exaggerated gestures and pulled long swigs from the bottle all the way home. The jug done, sufficient misdemeanour perpetrated, it would be almost no time before an aggrandized plume raised up in the distance, trailing the uncles' Buick as it scribbled its way across the prairie, meandering away down roads that were not much more than traces in the dirt.

The boys, roaming, might catch a snatch of Ma muttering about Robin up to her antics with Patrick again. Patrick would come back to the new place, marching past the carcass of the old '37, its cold dead lamps staring across the path.

Another Buick, the '37 had been one of the Old Man's untimely acquisitions. In the spring of 1938, the uncles had showed up in a new '38 coupe – not the taffy taupe and chocolate brown they'd seen splashed on roadsters in the States but still a stylish patent pale green. (It went without saying that) how it was the Old Man

found a '37 of the same colour was uncanny really. At seventy years of age he was buying his first car and he indulged the extravagance only because his speculations on the spotting of the homestead began to pay off.

In the summer of '38, he managed to cut a spectacular deal on the coupe with a man still smarting from a dry '37. The hybrid Marquis was a hardy wheat but it was no match for drought; nor could the fledgling germinations withstand the strangling Russian thistles – weeds with woody stalks the size of a man's wrist that seemed to thrive in difficulty. But now the Kellys, sited overlooking the bottomland of the river valley, were able to draw just enough water that year to sustain a crop. And the clan had looked relatively flush.

In late '38 the Marquis rusted out. And while the Old Man's bargain '37 was the spitting image of the uncles' snazzy '38 – with the exception of a few ornaments – it was seldom seen again outside its quarters in the machine shed on the old place.

In '39 the recovery was aided by an allotment of ten bushels of rust-resistant Thatcher to every household head. The Old Man fortuitously had each of his sons claim an allocation and in 1940 they were able to sow a full section. They were back on their feet that year but it wasn't without aid from the uncles and Ma's sewing.

More than a source of seed grain, the uncles brought with them - in the whirlwind of their arrival - bundles of money and merriment that settled out as they stopped in. They brought canvas and leather for Ma. And in the summer of '39 they carried in their wake a young constable of the Mounted Police. It seems there was

still a market for contraband, probably due to the latent grip of a habit cultivated as an accompaniment in the service of other vices - vices tended in the clubs beneath downtown Moose Jaw - extending local 'shine production well beyond Prohibition.

When the policeman arrived, the uncles' dust was still settling, a few feeble billows hanging adrift in the valley. But the distinctive shape of the Plymouth cruiser in the distance hadn't escaped the Old Man's attention and when Seamus and Kennedy pulled up, one look at him told them to listen and obey. They had a full tank and Seamus was to drive the coupe around the machine shed and out behind the horse barn. Kennedy set to hammering out the bottom of a plough, working with Casey and their father in the half of the machine shed where the big door stood open, this after changing quickly into combination overalls. Minutes later, the Mountie paused long enough to don his Stetson before approaching the men in the shed, allowing Seamus time to enter through the small door at back and nestle himself in, leaning against the car quartered in the dark side of the shop.

The Old Man was genuinely cordial with the young cop and asked after several veterans though he knew very well the whereabouts and the well being of most. The constable recognized less than half of them. But some were linked to legendary claims, he knew, and, disconcerted, he remained not quite sure of himself until his eyes adjusted to the gloom and he was able to make out the green Buick at the far side. The Old Man was trying to carry conversation over the ring of hammer blows and shuffled laterally to stay square to the cop. The cop

continued to face him but skewed his body, taking a couple of tentative sidesteps toward the car at first, before finally turning unceremoniously to march directly across the shop. Seamus bore a tinge of a smirk on his broad face as the Mountie strode up.

"Is this your vehicle?"

Seamus continued to rest against the car, thick arms laced across a formidable chest.

"Nah."

The cop was less impressed with the imposing posture than with the co-ordinate attire. Under his bib overalls, Seamus wore a white cotton shirt, a single button unfastened at the neck, ample sleeves caught up short where the cuffs were rolled back and stretched across beefy forearms, black Zoot suit trousers with grey pinstripes fringing the abbreviated legs of his combinations.

"Were you operating this vehicle?" The cop placed a hand on the rear bumper, clamped his hat to his head with the other, and bent to peer underneath. He pulled himself back up smoothly, stepped in front of the big man and gestured aggressively with a lift of his chin as he looked Seamus straight in the face.

"Oh, yes. I drove 'er the very day she was bring home – took Ma over Avonhurst…"

"Today. Today, not ten minutes ago."

Seamus's eyes glittered, apprehending the cop like so much lunch. "Ten minutes. This car ha'en't bin driv since ten day," he stated slowly, evenly.

"Is that so?" replied the Mountie, striding for the front of the car, a glance over his

shoulder at Seamus. Seamus wrested his frame from its cline against the car, pulling off with a wave motion that travelled from pelvis to shoulder blade just as the other man turned to catch his gaze and, holding it, to bring a hand down from shoulder level with some ceremony, placing a palm pretentiously on the engine cowling. "I've been following this rig since it left the highway."

The cowling was surprisingly cool.

Seamus sprang forward, freed the latch and exposed the engine. He wore a grey felt derby with a dark blue band and he wore it cocked back, but now its rolled rim pointed down on the khaki Stetson like a beak and he hovered over the other, the Mountie reaching in to feel above the exhaust manifold. Quizzically finding no warmth, the constable licked a finger and gingerly touched the manifold, touched again, then laid a finger on, finally grasped the cold iron Y-pipe, paused, and tediously drew himself back across the fender to stand upright again. It was as if there was a sag, though, visible in the stiff fabric of his uniform.

Seamus leaned on the radiator, the heel of one hand laid on the tank. "From the highway, y' say. Is that so?"

The Mountie's lips tightened. He could have flinched. Still suffering disbelief, he hesitated, then executed a few sidesteps back towards the open side of the shop. He glanced at the three men hunched busily over the plough, was assaulted once more by the shine on Kennedy's shoes. Clearing his throat, involuntarily dipping his head, he brought his hand to the rim of his hat, said, "Good day, men," and walked with all the dignity he could muster out into the dazzling sunshine.

The Old Man hurled a fierce eye across the shop while, outside, the policeman caught an ogle of his own. Pausing ever so briefly at the cruiser to unseat his hat, he was accosted by the sight of a wheat-coloured urchin in a light blue dress standing barefoot in the dark silt, clutching a rag doll under an elbow and stretching her chin high so as to peer out at him from below the overhanging mantle of a genuine buffalo-head Stetson. He placed his hat on the seat, she gave him a snaggle-toothed smile, and he backed the Plymouth away with a swirl and a whine.

"Ye 're nothing but a mick, y' are, nothing but a goddamn mick." Joseph Kelly balked at his own outburst. Seamus stood firm and silent. Kennedy stood by the Old Man but his eyes cavorted with Seamus.

"Not at all pleased 'til ye've turned a contest to a conflict, to a fight. Do y' not see what ye've done to the man, y' great ox, what ye've done t' yerself? Ye've left the lad smartin' and he'll be lookin' to see you pinched, y' can be expecting that, now." The Old Man broke off deliberately, willfully, but his agitation was not quite spent and he was spurred to add, spitting, "Look at ya!" And then he really did look at his son.

Seamus simply stood gripping both sides of the bib on combinations two sizes too small. The bright white of his shirt accentuated the explosion of his shoulders. Too short for his trunk, the coveralls pulled his trousers up short at the crotch and left the cuffs dangling near the tops of his ankle boots. His direct (and steady) eye still hinted a glint and there was a slight purse on his lips. Nearly ejecting a laugh, the Old Man stifled his discharge to a snort and ran a hand across his mug.

"Jesus," he said, shaking his head, starting for the house, "Jesus, Jesus."

Evy skipped up beside the man she called Jo-pa as he flanked the shed. She wore his old service-issue hat and peeped away underneath, copper curls and black satin ribbon tumbling out too. From the valley, a distant yip or holler as the boys bounded up.

And from the machine shop, the twittering of grown men.

A warbler flickered yellow, now and then, against the mottled green background of bush, like a pendulous figure winking on a felt board. She couldn't see it yet, but she knew it marked her destination like the malicious glint of a pending pin prick. And as they galloped along the ridge, bounding over spikes of thin grass, sailing over spots of rock where domes and knuckles showed through the loam, she remembered this same horse struggling to slide free at the time of his birth, remembered the Old Man puncturing the sac with a little pocket knife, recalled the fluid blown free of the nostrils. But now it seemed they two pressed against a membrane, as if she too strained against some amnion, and she yearned for some sort of pen knife of her own, some point to pierce the (encumbering) caul. It held her, it seemed, struggling sluggishly in its thick fluid, and draped her in anxiety laid on like a weighty wet blanket.

I could see her riding. I could see the yellow warbler, though they must have been miles apart, see the dark peaked line at its beak open, a diamond-shaped space at its head for a time until, again, the line. The air was thick with sage and clover and timothy and she pulled a deep breath; then with caustic recalcitrance,

she kicked her heels into Scooter's flanks. She wore a red blouse and tan doe-skin riding breeches that Ma had sewn. There was a lighter, horse-shoe shaped piece where her butt slapped the saddle as she dug with her heels again and again and the horse surged and bunched beneath her. The horse was nearly the colour of the breeches, the arc of her thigh complemented the curve of his chest; his heavy light-coloured mane waved and flapped like a tattered flag, her dark hair stretched and bobbed out behind, and she leaned into the rein she held chest high, as if pointing a foil. She tucked her chin, just a bit, so as not to dislodge the Old Man's Stetson.

She rode along the ridges that rose from the river valley and, though they still sped through coulees and crested swells, these rollers faded and puddled into a vast expanse of prairie off to their right. Further to the right a hazy line of hills lifted the prairie plateau from the ancient valley. To the left the hills dropped to the river, rose again, slashed with forks of coulees and bulging with ridges, to still into a plane of grey-brown prairie for as far as the eye could see. There was no end in sight, forward or back, either, and the greater their efforts at speed, the more it seemed they struggled in stasis.

I could see from her ear, it seemed. I could drop my eyes down onto the hills from where I couldn't help but notice the cleft, couldn't help but take in the fissure that housed the river and ran parallel to our travel. Looking back from her left, I could see the sharp coulees marking the valley, wiggling back from perpendicular angles, to reflect themselves on either side of the river. They formed a kind of visual echo, folds and creases opposed, gully and col marked

with dark woolly bits in vees and triangles where they neared the trench of water; the river below always challenging the bends, carrying them off - the spoils of soil – to future turns along the central fissure. The picture was cerebral, a cerebrum, the legacy and memory of the land no different than the evolution of language or the catachresis of people, of a community, cutting a new vessel with the shards of vessel. And as we raced along towards the spark, like an impulse in search of idea, I could see a red dog keeping pace, maintaining a long, loping stride, his tongue a loose strap flapping to the side.

He was a setter and the sun light worked his crimson colour to golden where it ignited in his jangling curls. His ears and silken fur pulled straight at the bottom of his undulations and floated at the top, mimicking the motion of the young woman's flared elbows. I was never so acutely aware of the carriage of flesh, of its volume and density, the heft of figures that could only have been crafted in the cast of spirit.

They were gifts, the both of them, the horse and dog. The quarter horse, at that time a pony, the Old Man's last birthday present to Evelyn.

He seemed finally content that evening, the Old Man, presenting Evy with the colt she'd cared for for months, allowing the boys, Casey's sons, in in case of rain, he said, from their fencing, early on a clear day in late spring. Though Seamus wouldn't be there, he'd managed, the Old Man, to make things right with the British on his son's behalf. He'd even overlooked Kennedy's again drawing with him some marvel for Mary Robin and the ribbon girls when he knew full well that his son had long since drunk up his pay packet. Kennedy, hoarse-voiced and slap-

happy, had brought books, and Ma had stayed mum.

The Old Man - her Jo-pa - seemed particularly pleased to present Evy with the task of naming her new pony and, since Casey was back in hospital, took the opportunity to enlighten her brothers while Evelyn deliberated. "Namin', ye know," he said, "namin's a solemn and obliging thing." The boys stared back, blankly, resigned to deferent compliance, so he continued. "Now naming a man," he mused, "is a matter of pattern – one for the sake of another, or even the same one deemed and re-deemed according to his intentions – it's a designed undertaking." While the boys smiled, tentatively, at him with their mouths, Evelyn was busy choosing to forsake the elegant and the fortuitous, and settled on "Scooter."

That evening, despite the Old Man's lurching gait, he and his eleven year old granddaughter once more ambled pleasantly through the dapple of light and gloom that patterned the cool floor of the big horse barn. Once again he schooled her on tack – on bridle and halter, stirrup and cinch – and related their design and function to events in his experience. But for the first time, he urged her to remember them to the pending events of her own course.

That night the Old Man expired. He simply ceased in his sleep early one Sunday. At 5 AM Ma rose to make breakfast. At 6 she told the boys, when they got up to do chores. And at 7 she went in to tell Evelyn.

At one year to the day, the family began doting in earnest. It seemed they'd surmised from her introversion following the Old Man's demise that she in fact continued to grieve and, on this premise, attempted to sate her perceived longing

by bringing everything he could have promised, until they'd habituated themselves to the practice and began bringing, as well, everything they could never have shared with the Old Man in life. The boys, Ma's "barbarians" and their cousin from the new place, were fencing again - this time a pole fence along the lane to the house. They gave themselves the afternoon off for Evy's birthday, but they'd learned from the Old Man of the ready labour resource at the Lebret Industrial School up the valley and they were, for some reason, eager to display the young charge they'd acquired to Evelyn. His name was Sam and he wasn't much older than she was but he had a skin of purple leather, lightening only around the eyes and low at the neck. The oversized, long-sleeved shirt that hung on him as if covering the frame of a scarecrow belied a sinewy strength. So the boys sat shirtless on the rails of the fence while Sammy John twisted out a few more post holes, next to what they called the lawn, and Bobby fetched the puppy. Dressed in dresses, their tresses in ribbons, Evy and Patty sat playing jacks at the table set up on the lawn… until Bobby dropped the little Irish setter, squirming, tumbling and trembling, into Evelyn's lap. Ma brought several pounds of chocolate cake with thick, gooey icing; Mabel staggered and skittered across the yard with two pitchers of lemonade. Mabel had never acted much like a mother to Evelyn, always kowtowing and cavorting with Casey, but now she took up where Ma had left off: she picked up ribbon and barrettes and combs and bands, and though she didn't sew, she did sometimes pick up fashion magazines when she went to see Casey in hospital. Ma had taken to smothering Evelyn in whatever would keep her around the place: she brought the music teacher in,

fawned over Evy's appearance and fatuated on her looks, and went so far as to urge the lot of the girls to take cover, even on school days, amongst the great members and warm hearths of the big house in bad weather. But presently they celebrated, Evelyn's aunt and uncle standing, as if in wait, while the children sat - the girls at the table, the boys on the fence - and the women served. Sammy was implored to eat and cajoled with quips about an expected increase in performance. He kept his face down, peering over his brows, then dropped his eyes, wagged his head and hooked his thumbs in his pockets, until Bobby brought a plate and glass and said, "A man's gotta eat." A smile skipped across Sammy's wide mouth before he could squelch it and he stood frozen for a time, his crew cut full of prickles, his sight fixed hard upon the cake he held, because he was certain they all watched, especially the sniggering ribbon girls.

The doting of dolts, you could say, summed up the boys' contributions. With the Old Man gone, Casey generally away and Patrick expatriated at the new place, they engaged in a silent quibbling, a kind of one-upmanship where each quietly and brazenly asserted that he was best or first to provide protection or comfort. But they'd be just busting out in derision, deploring loudly every jarring jot, all the repugnant minutiae, of any plan gone over the top. Evelyn had about a half dozen walking sticks – peeled, dried and varnished – from the local caragana, aspen or alder. There was never a question but that she (and the other Kelly girls) would be well-seated on the school bus, and today there was a clamour to level the table where she and Patty and Mary Robin sat. They'd never even be given a chance to lend a hand at cleaning the barn. But there would continue to be gaffes

like Trent's "ladies lift," a six day project that earned him a mitt full of splinters, a split thumb, and years of ridicule. What kept his cohorts both groaning and chortling was a V-shaped ramp he'd built to circumvent the tall steps at the front of the big house. The point of the V was to the right of the steps at about the four foot level. One leg sloped downward to meet the walk, the other upward to the landing at the top of the step and, between them, at the opening of the V, hulked the big stone stairs to the left. Trent would plank the thing in, spending much of his Christmas holiday in doing so, so it wasn't so much the bulky shape, resembling a kind of cut-away view of the bow of a ship, that would offend. It would come to be called the Jane Russell, standing out conspicuously as it did in its yellow garb – shaped as the view from the west may have offered. The paint Trent used was the stuff they kept for the wheels on the John Deere - deep jaune yellow - since he didn't dare use the red barn paint, but he added a little of the white barn trim. The result was a finish so slick that the slightest lick of frost left the ramp as slippery as a ski slope. But the colour. Even when the evening of night and day allowed them to share their differences, the alien structure on the front of the Old Man's dignified domicile shone across the valley to the east like a stage prop in a school play. Yet it stayed. And it stayed two tones below deep jaune yellow. They'd discovered that the elbow-shaped appendage (if viewed from the south) enabled Casey to navigate the front entrance, since he most often arrived in a wheel chair when he was home these days. Trent wasn't about to reverse his work in the face of adverse opinion, and the other boys certainly weren't about to finish it, but neither did anyone suggest that they sever the

appendage.

Casey was worst (of all). A charity case, he said, chuckling, but he wore the moniker like a mantle of shame with pockets loaded down with guilt, the fabric chafing in the spots where his skin should have been. Needle had replaced the sparkle in the old Casey; the new Casey had aged: he teased tiredly with Ma, was simply silent with Mabel – since he'd pretty much learned to resign himself in obedience to his caregiver. The same code that saw him hard-pressed to coddle his boys – young men really – held that he could hardly cuddle lads who routinely did jobs he could not now nor would ever again be able to handle. But Evelyn. With Evelyn he could spend some emotion. For Evelyn he could spring from his chair at the most meagre of grounds for the rendering of errand. He would eagerly amble to the phantom tasks, as best he was able, until his bandages were stained at the joints, the brittle dermis cracked, and he'd succeeded in securing a taste of satiation. He would draw her to his knee, amidst objectionable glances, savouring this time like a pauper treating at an uptown eatery.

The charitable Mary Robin held no stock in such truck because Mary Robin had truck of her own. Mary considered herself an emissary, a self-appointed emitter of all things necessary (and the essence (Ssense) of formal agency). At this point in time, she decided, she would take time to emit the necessary solemnities around the occasion of her younger cousin's birthday, with the naming of the new dog, and so enliven it. Magniloquently, the breezy Mary Robin attended the little creature's nomination, and poetically breathed the name "Pierre." Demurely, she deferred to Evelyn. Evy pretended no complicity and simply called him "Ralph."

Uncles and aunts and brothers and cousins, and books and looks and timbers and embers, she rode as if to escape the long bony fingers laid on her, shake off about six years' care, erase the tracks they left – but she still wore the Stetson, the riding britches, still held fast to the horse, laid claim to the dog. Ten days – it seemed an impossible stretch – ten days and she'd be installing herself in the cute attic room they'd found, overlooking the river, and across from the university in Saskatoon. Soon. But she was feeling a strange sense of déjà vu as we passed along the valley, as if she would pass this way again.

The wrinkles in the land faded to subtle ripples while the river widened and its banks flattened. She brought the horse to a walk and he pranced a bit, blowing and tossing and dog-tracking while Ralph caught up, panting. They advanced at a saunter as the grasses grew longer and the flanks of the river spread into a meadow with clumps and clusters of elm and alder. The yellow warbler was visible in an alder bluff but we stopped short. It seems the boys had been teaching Ralph to point and he'd come set, frozen on the bush that held the bird. Evelyn laughed at his seriousness, pulled Scooter to a stop, and slid to the ground. There was nothing of note in the tree but the warbler, next to its nest – three nests piled one on top of the other, really – and, higher up, a waxwing that only became noticeable when it began hopping from twig to twig. The grass was higher than it had seemed on Scooter and it was green and stiff-stalked above a blonde thatch. It rustles like the skirt of a silk dress, she thought as she waded through. She'd pulled Scooter's bridle off and hung it over her arm, and it clinked and tinkled as she pushed her strides towards the river. Ralph dived aimlessly through the thigh-

high billows like a porpoise. Scooter lolled and munched. The long grass parted in front of her to reveal a slender finger of water that reached up from the lazy river. As she approached, the small, diamond-shaped pool at its tip burst into brilliant spangles, like a children's choir timorously banging their triangles, or the tinny clanging shimmer of church chimes. A second later, the tingle of light fled along the still water, leaving a clear film on dark grey soil. Evelyn bent at the water's edge, at the tip - a corner where a light alkali deposit marked its rim - and peered into the smooth bowl of the lucent pool. Only a sheen on the clear fluid betrayed its presence, as if the earth were awake but not yet conscious. A water skate distorted the gloss with a flicker that flew like an unconscious tremor across the fluid surface. She noticed two tiny beetles swimming just above the flawless curve of dark mud with long, deliberate strokes of their oar-like legs. Shedding the bridle and placing it in a neat pile, she slipped out of her boots, stripped off her socks, and sat down at the blunt point of the little ditch. She leaned back on her hands and poised her toes over the pool for a second before plunging them in. Ripples deformed the surface and sent a slow blink across the puddle as she reached for the mud. It was warm, the silt thick, and smooth as saliva - and salving to the touch. She remained a moment, then drew her feet out quietly, stood, and peeled away the husks of clothing. Turning her face to the sun, she spread her feet and stretched, her legs and her arms forming two inverted vees, one over top of the other. There may have been a breath of wind that touched the grass and tickled her spine, but she felt it like a feather of attention dragged haltingly across her skin. She took two steps into the pool until her hands touched

the water and she noted the diamond shapes, one inside the other, formed by the reflected vees. The purple dreamer in the alders took note of the beautiful buttocks that held firm while she twisted back and forth at the waist, drawing semi-circles with her fingertips, and lifted her arms and rolled her shoulders in a slow callisthenic action that made her torso seem almost serpentine. She slipped down into the pool. It had a salivation smell, perhaps even faintly like urine, she thought, but not once you're in. She dug her toes in like roots in the deeper cool of the deeper pool, into the soft mud, a black wash in a saline bath, 'til she could feel little stones joining the mix. Men, she thought, a sweat smell – dust and a bit of ammonia – but, no, it was sweeter, like cider vinegar, and more delicate, like the scent that followed on the sneeze of a child. She forked her fingers into the mud. It was warm and slick and as thick as mucous and she lifted it out in silty gobs that lingered before dripping out between her fingers. It would stick to her arms, she noticed, just about anywhere it could find purchase – crack, crease or crevice, the faintest of ridges, the finest of down - and she packed it on, first her arms, neck and face, and then in her hair. She rolled her back, buttocks and legs in its muck, then lifted herself to sit at the rim of the pool. Leaning back, she plastered her breasts and belly and packed her bush before stroking the clay mix on her legs. She angled herself toward the sun, lay back on her elbows, lifted her chin and closed her eyes. "In the earth, on the earth, and of the earth," rolled into her thought. But she wasn't long in that penetrating blaze before she was inundated with a brilliant yellow, smattered by vivid orange patterns and with negative flashes of startling midnight blue. After watching the tumble of colour

'til she felt the clay begin to stiffen, she stood to collect the sun into the muddy cortex on her back. She opened her eyes to discover that traces of the patterns lay hovering in irregular haloes over her view. In the grass she could see that there was a little breeze, and she felt the clutch of the casting as the wind and sun made a poultice of the tacky soil. What drew her attention, though, was the firm stroke of surveillance she felt as it traversed the cup of breast, the ripple of rib, the long subtle arc from hip to knee. She cranked around to the east and stood frozen, bouncing her gaze from willow bunch to rush to cottonwood, before fixing on the alders. She made no move to retreat, stood firmly, commandingly, while the thirsty earth took a long hard suck on her body. When the plaster was all but dry, began to crack and flake away, she stepped back to the pool and plopped under the surface. There she rubbed her forehead, cheeks and chin, massaged her scalp, and raked and tousled her hair before popping her head free, face first. She released her breath, blowing droplets free, but as she scooped the liquid from around her eyes, a film remained on her lips, silvery rivulets of mild brine ran over her teeth and fell to her tongue, dropping a tear to her mind. The silt she had layered on, she now scrubbed off, and in her mind's eye the tiny cinders of humus engrained the brackish fluid, ripping sensation across her skin and stripping away all but the freshest growth. She left no spot untouched and as she emerged, glistening, from the pool, there was a pinkness to her golden hue, like you might see on a newly-skinned caragana limb. She ran her hands in long, firm strokes over her torso, her lower back and buttocks, and her legs and cast off the water and the little specks of soil that clung to her with a flip of her wrists. But as she

stood drying, casually eyeing the bush – whether the sun, the soil, or just an imagining – it seemed, at least to the dreamer, that she had already begun to grey. Evelyn poked and kicked back into her clothes, squeezed her hair back and swung a few wraps of ribbon around it before tying a loose bow, and plunked the Stetson on her head. Scooter readily accepted the bit, didn't so much as lay his ears back when she slipped the bridle over his head, and it was no time, it seemed, until they were headed back over the first ridge at a light canter, Ralph springing from his station at a gopher hole to catch up and lope along, too. But as we dropped from view, Scooter seesawed in what had been an easy gait, Ralph's tail went rigid as a fence rail, and I could see what she could hear, what they all could.

In the bush, you'd swear that his body was a mottled green, but a purple head, complete with wattles – those horny tufts that put corners on his head in sprays of blue-black bristle where his crew cut was growing out – a beak-shaped nose, a black eye in a red rim, these things should have given him up. Sam carried with him the bundle his grandfather had given him eight weeks ago, on the day he'd completed his schooling, the day the old *omosoma* said it was time now to learn his life. In the bush, if the young Kelly woman had looked, she'd have seen the skeleton of the sun dance – sprigs of tipi poles, a willow tent frame, the tall centre pole of the lodge – the reason he'd come. They were as poor as dirt but they'd managed to come together early that summer for a ceremony that all the young people had only heard about. They saw kinship ties rewoven, heard stories of their own heroes (though they'd lost a clear understanding of *nehiyawewin*, as it was called), saw respects paid to people who believed the dance would deliver

them from hunger and hardship, and even saw some dancing through the open south wall of the sacred lodge. And it didn't matter if they were found out or given up because the new Act had ended more than sixty years of prohibition. After a week, all the young men dreamed that they'd bring the vision that would inspire next year's dance, not thirty yards from where the last took place - and everyone coveted a bundle. Sam's was couched in a fringed leather sheath, a medicine bag that his *ohkoma* had made long ago. It consisted of a feather, a beak, a rock and a bone whistle; no tobacco; no sweetgrass (these he would have to earn). He had gathered these things and returned to the most sacred place he knew (besides Father's big church in Lebret) to embark on the first day of his vision quest. It was a serious and solemn endeavour, but some of the others had regarded him with dancing eyes when *omosoma* had pronounced him Frog Moon Robin (April Robin, *ohkoma*'s name) until he could complete his first expedition – what used to be a buffalo hunt, but would now be a search for the white buffalo's offerings – and earn a more masculine name of his own. He had nestled himself amongst the leaves, near the grass and the water. He had lodged himself with the birds, in the long stand of alders, and he rolled the rock in his left hand, stroked the whistle in the other. But now he was raided by wheat-coloured gleamings of breasts with brown buttons, ample firm buttocks, and tangles of chestnut in neat, trim triangles. And more than that, the casual look took up occupation, too, the faintest trace of a darkening on her countenance, the certain lash of a tongue on her lip. A warbler flickered in a high branch and on the ground, looking at first like cardinals, a group of waxwings stood in a straight row

and picked up seeds in order, one after the other. Sam squeezed his relics in his fists, leaned his head back, and opened his throat, tearing the air.

What she heard was a tailing growl (waaw…) that ran into a howling (wawaw… waaww…), culminating in a sharp bark (wwaAW! wAW!).

What he'd said was, "Oyoy… oyoyooo… oyYO! yYO!"

Just This

It's just
That all this dirt is so depressing
Prairie gumbo, prairie dust.
No crashing
Surf, no jets of rock show

Bursting
Out. This earthen sea accepts the plough
And the seed drill. As boring
As a cow
Lazily licking salt.

'Till now
You feel the silky flank of fine silt
Press your feet, know the mellow
Scent of milk
As grass and fresh-turned soil

But still
You say the power of ore and oil,
With gaud's help, can by default
Fill a soul
And, failing that, a head

With spoils
Nutrients that built your granddad fed
Your stock, fill your cells and boil
Through your blood
Deserving no disgust

In stead.
Take the power latent in this crust
From lightning, river or dead
Elder. Just
We touch you from this rest.

The cops came back. This time, the constable brought a sergeant with him, the sergeant augmenting authority by aiding confidence and adding an air of stability. Not only were their engagements to be concerted, but the sergeant had established, at the constable's conference, that they were dealing with the horseman, Joe Kelly, infamous with recruits and famous with horses – both as trainer and trader. He'd been a Staff Sergeant at Depot (the big orientation and drill centre in Regina) where officially he'd been Chief Riding Instructor, but where he was effectively the Stablemaster, controlling every detail affecting the horses. A Fenian sympathizer, he'd bolted the minute the Force received its royal designation but not before sending several examples of the finest stock to the maintenance pasture where he could later buy them up at fertilizer factory prices. In fact, Joseph Kelly had been Chief Instructor, but not before logging more than a thousand patrols and proving his worth as a horse handler on numerous campaigns. His impatience with the fresh candidates, particularly those who considered themselves gentlemen, prompted him to delegate drilling, where possible, to more junior noncoms, and although his father was decidedly Green, he had no more a pining for the Fenians than a fawning for the Orange. As for the bolting, he'd remained until '05, a full year after the knighting of the Service. Notably, Commissioner Perry had confided that very development to Joseph as early as the spring of '04.

As superintendent, Perry had been impressed by Corporal Kelly who never missed a patrol, even in bad weather, especially in brutal weather, in savage conditions – making regular rounds and establishing repute in the bleak years at

the end of the century when the snow was deep and fuel scarce. More than a few of the folk in the south country were indebted to the corporal's spirited tenacity and sense of duty, and it escaped the commissioner why, five years later, the same man would scoff openly when discussing policy – mostly policy, it seemed, to do with the pass system and permitting Indians off reserves and prohibition of the Sun Dance. Commissioner Perry guessed that a man recruited as little more than a lad from the rich Grand Valley region of Upper Canada was missing, perhaps craving, the finer things in life. And fancying himself somewhat the Shakespearean figure of Henry V, mixing benevolently with the troops, Perry sauntered over from headquarters to approach Staff Sergeant Kelly just outside the stable at the new Riding Centre. The Centre had been erected at about the same time Joseph Kelly was promoted to Depot and on the site where the old new Centre had burned down. The new commissioner could ill afford to lose a man who slipped through rank and into responsibility with a composure and a disinterest that convinced the entire division towards a confident and competent comportment.

Encountering this Kelly, he adopted a fatherly tone. Kelly was in an open stall attached to the outside wall of the stable, steadying a fetlock between his knees and shaping a hoof with a rasp. Perry's speech, a consoling rumble, carried just a squeak of authoritarianism, particularly when hurdling issues like assuring revised pay rates, and he winced when his oratory was interrupted, on occasion, by sudden thundering bangs from the stable. Sergeant Kelly seemed almost not to notice and he listened intently, always dutifully lifting an enquiring gaze from his

file to his superior a moment or so after the commissioner stalled.

Kelly had tethered an especially spirited mount – one with a propensity for biting and kicking anything within range - in a stall where he'd installed a heavy pulley in an overhead beam. From here a canvas sack containing seventy or eighty pounds of horseshit (just the right consistency to preclude injury and preserve the sack) could be lowered so as to contact strategically the hind quarters. This particular horse now conceded long periods in a static stance, the sack resting against hock or heel, until the bursting fury demanding spiteful expression surpassed the weight of exhaustion and another abrupt discharge would send the unseen assailant swinging wildly in all directions, the impacts of frenzied attempts to assault it booming off the plank walls as the brute struck out blindly anywhere.

The commissioner nevertheless persevered in his rocky pitch but came quickly to the point. Playing his trump card, Perry thrust into Kelly's possession a peerless confidence: "You see, Staff Sergeant, we shall in the course of this very year be venerated, in Regina, by a visiting of the Monarch himself, before whom you shall perform the Ride and at which time the Force shall indeed be knighted, the members held thenceforth the Royal North West Mounted." The commissioner pulled in his cheeks as if sucking hard on something and looked triumphantly down the length of his nose at Kelly, confident in the power of his confidance in spite of the racket in the background.

Now Joseph Kelly had seen some improvement in the outfit - pension eligibility with twenty years' service and official adoption of the Stetson around the turn of the century - but what impressed him most, settling in to seed his future

perspectives from as early as his first campaign in '86, was the protection the Crown afforded her starving wards when the buffalo failed, allowing not only that each ward draw a ration when refraining from the nasty one-upmanship of horse stealing contests, but awarding cattle, in some cases, to those who could demonstrate a desire towards a more domesticated lifestyle. So it was Perry's earnest parley that pressed Joseph to unseat himself from security of the corps, disavowing his desire for the cozy niche he'd finally earned. He received the announcement without a flinch, contending that it rang portentous. He'd seen, early, hard men bringing flexible responses to difficult deliberations and he'd seen lately soft men bearing mechanical, machine-like auto-responses. It was here he intended never to arrive and so the following fall, when his pension kicked in, tendered his resignation through his immediate superior commissioned officer, the Riding Master. A further conformance saw him relinquish his uniform, all but the high boots and the hat. The Stetson he had purchased years before, before its official adoption, from the Regina canteen, but only recently formed it to the new standard, a uniform pleat in each quarter drawn up to a peak at the centre point. (He'd always worn a leather band, buckled to the left and it was now exactly as it had originally been, but for the faint traces of old folds.) These things would continue to distinguish his appearance for years to come, the man no less inscribed than the few once-proud nags he'd saved from a fate as food for the Depot dogs, nags bearing a fused MP brand who would found the Kelly stock operation.

Joe Kelly had first considered breaking off in '89 when his three years entitled

him to a long service grant of 160 acres of land and again in 1900 when a bushel of wheat hit one dollar. But he'd re-signed on in '90, scouting out promising plots while on patrol all over the territory, and remained at the turn of the century, not so much because the ranks had been ravished to bolster the military force in South Africa, but because he speculated that among those returning from the conflict would be one Mary, a nurse at the Headquarters hospital (and he dared not leave). From chance, it seems, springs destiny, from accident the substantive, and the Kellys, the Old Man and Ma, departed the barracks and the budding city with three year old Patrick, Seamus a toddler, and Kennedy on the way. The year was 1905, fortuitous in that the fledgling Land Office of the new-born Province of Saskatchewan was eager to be seen extending a hand, particularly if given the opportunity to emphasize the authority of provincial jurisdiction. Joseph had needed to present only the subtlest of suggestions in order to augment his long service claim. The tongue of rich prairie he'd chosen, extending out over the Qu'Appelle Valley, was all of two quarters in area but the coulee that flickered up its centre was deemed non-arable, sight unseen, and he was granted special dispensation for which title to the entire peninsula was honoured under his 160 acre entitlement. As if to punctuate the prerogative to confer such grants, to confirm publicly the intention of doing so, the Land Office further awarded free management of the bottom land between the Kelly property and the water's edge for as long as the family remained. Reportedly, the Qu'Appelle River often flooded this plain, rendering the realty undesireable, and such a concession would certainly be attractive to the mixed farmer who could both put his hand to

workable land and bring his stock to water.

So the Old Man, at nearly thirty-seven, toting Ma (eleven years his junior) and a clutch of children, struck out for the homestead. They had with them five light horses - Joseph's nags – and a magnificent pair of heavies, salvaged from the maintenance pasture, drew a wagonload of construction material for the horse barn, with Ma's precious collection of furniture perched on top. Legend has it that the Old Man and his Percheron team skidded a two-room shack across four miles of prairie to get it home that fall. And it was in this shack - deposited on the vast, flat expanse between the hills and the river valley, with a little stack of hay, a little wooden barn, and a handful of implements like so much insignificant debris – that Ma raised boys while the Old Man turned soil, cut hay, and gathered field stones for the foundation of the house he would build.

It was a bold move. As he would later often relate to the boys, it was an act of affirmation – maybe his favourite word, affirmation – and he would dwell on it, the Old Man would, acclaiming its confluence of movement and firmness, of motion and stability, like a blade, he said, on ice. "It's as sure as the truth, it is, and nothing no more stable than the very act of movement."

Seamus and Kennedy blazed into the yard, Kennedy looking slightly amused as Seamus ground the coupe to a halt at the machine shed, then slightly perplexed when Seamus left the engine running and hopped out to open the big door at back on the empty side of the building. The big Plymouth cruiser wheeled by the constable was no match for Seamus and the Buick, and from the hilltop where

they'd stopped, at the sergeant's suggestion, the policemen could see the glint of the car disappear into the shape of the shed. Once again, Seamus left the engine running as he closed the big door, then proceeded across the shop to open one of equal size on the back side. Kennedy grabbed a crowbar that had been leaning on the door and said, "Jesus, Seamus, there's no vessel, we don't have the tank in the damn car…," but Seamus, glancing over, gleamed with the eye of a shadowing wolf and it was sure he wasn't about to be denied. So Seamus drove the car right through – reaching out to snatch the bar on the way by - and into the open end of the wheeled rack, an iron lattice supporting cascades of drying hay, while Kennedy secured the breach. Headlong and breakneck though he was, Seamus slowed to creeping as he approached the dark interior, in case Ma and Evelyn were dabbling inside - playing "princess" as they so often did - then parked the car there. Both brothers met the Old Man emerging around the house.

Out in the yard a sheet of dust stretched over them as the Plymouth pulled in and they passed through, squinting, to see the cops step up, the constable talking before they'd completed their approach. "I suppose you'll tell me now no one's been driving the green coupe in the last ten days?" he galloped and fixed a glare on his monolithic adversary. The sergeant gave the Old Man a faint, entreating smile as Seamus answered. "No… no, I'd not say that… more on fifteen, twenty day, I'd say."

"Are you the horseman, Joe Kelly, then, Mr. Kelly?" the sergeant interjected.

"I'd be Joseph Kelly," replied the Old Man, "and you'd be…?"

"Sergeant Murphy," smiled the sergeant politely, emphatically, "Constable

Wright." He gestured. The constable pulled his gaze from Seamus, clamped his mouth into a flat smile, and winced a nod, glancing quickly askance at the sergeant.

"You're something of a mythical creature around Headquarters area," Murphy continued, "or you were until the superintendent retired. And I don't mind tellin' you it got to stickin' a bit in a fella's craw. But if half of it's true, I'd hafta say we're at no small pains to make up the debt yet."

"Must be Fowler, then, the superintendent," the Old Man said, a shadow of rumination threatening to glaze his eye, "only one foolish enough to stay thirty years, spendin' ten good years or more growin' hoary in an office they'll pay ye t' leave. Don't hardly imagine anyone findin' him keen on his remembrance of me." He checked the sergeant with a quick peek.

"He flew into Depot touting a promise of a commission and toting a tailored officer's dress uniform from his father." There was the suggestion of a smile on the Old Man's face. "You can imagine his horror findin' himself beholden to me, a sergeant. I only knew the man a few weeks, never did find out if he calloused up. Last I remember of Fowler was him and me eye to eye in the arena long after the rest had been dismissed, me barkin' at him to get his noble bloody arse back on his Western Broncho and pretend an example of an officer of the Mounted Police and him standin' there with his lip tremblin' and the blood stainin' the drawers of his khakis." Sober-faced, he added, "What sort of debt is it Mr. Fowler's recounting would have you strivin' to make good, Mr. Murphy?"

"Oh, the settling, certainly, I'd say, between the town and the barracks," the

sergeant said without a hitch, "rescuin' the Swede at Milestone, there, that put an end to the feudin' of the residents and the members."

"Ah, yes. And where abouts would you have been posted at that time, sergeant?" The sergeant quashed a grin, glanced up, looked down. "Oh, now and then I made an appearance around B Division in those days, but I was about two feet scant of the height requirement.

"My uncle Dan was a member …killed in Africa after volunteerin'. Left quite an impression – you might say I was his replacement, fillin' in fifteen years late."

"Dan … Dan Murphy, would it be?" queried the Old Man, rummaging in recall. But quickly, "The joker, Danny Murphy, then? Yes. Yes, the joker, Danny Murphy." He smiled a bit. "Always in dutch with the CO for pullin' pranks. Usually on recruits over at Depot. Once had three o' them scramblin' to shave their heads, as I recollect, before their first night of sentry duty." He flicked a sporting glance at Murphy. "It seems Danny had inadvertently allowed the recruits to overhear him warnin' a number of constables about the fierce and stealthy Eyebrow tribe, wouldn't y' know. Told 'em they'd best prepare themselves for any patrol they might be undertakin' on the morrow as the tribe was reported on the move, probably passin' through that night, and if a lone constable were to happen across that bunch out on the prairie, he'd be certain of bein' scalped. Of course, the constables were all in the know, one explainin' to the rest, in a loud strong voice, around Danny bein' the only member to survive a brush with the Eyebrow. And Danny testifyin' to the encounter …that it was the Blessed Virgin gave him the presence of mind t' quick as a blink shave his hair -

and him nearly paralysed with fright - renderin' his scalp worthless.

"It worked famously 'til, as luck would have it, the bloody superintendent thrust in - Perry it was – returnin' t' Headquarters in the middle of the night to find the sentry out of uniform. The sentry one of them recruits, head as bald as a cherub's arse shinin' in the moonlight, kepi hat stowed in the sentry house so as not to obstruct a perfectly good view of that worthless expanse.

"Nearly did the joker in, that one did, what with the super eruptin' like a shithouse volcano and the lava rollin' down over the CO and the CO scorchin' and drownin' at the same time and lookin' t' strike out at somethin' and the joker t' thank for it all." The sergeant was looking relaxed, the constable like a cub scout at his first campfire ghost story. Seamus eyed the constable, vexed that he'd appeared in company. The Old Man rolled on. "Poisoned he was, the CO, just poisoned. Restricted the B Division from any part of Depot. That meant the canteen, as well. Six weeks in the middle of summer and every man in the district confined t' barracks after evening stables. That meant there'd be no visitin' the local saloons, either. Officers too. There'd be no loungin' in the mess, no retirin' t' brandys. No distraction, he said, from bringin' every blessed member to a refined knowledge of the *Jones Constable's Manual*, with special instruction to be attended every evening exceptin' the Sabbath.

"As ye might imagine, all this wasn't long in surfacin' in the *Flood*, as we called it back then – the *Regina Leader*. Nicholas Flood Davin it was brought out the *Flood*, and he had a fine ear for rumblings around the barracks – an exceedingly fine ear, I'd have t' add, for the yelps around injured commerce comin' from the

resident shop-owners, in this case mostly the saloon keepers. It wasn't hurtin' circulation at all, havin' the *Flood* give the Force a black eye for the good health of the feud …and at the same time leavin' the guilty stain on the super for the requital of the constabulary." The Old Man fingered his lips. The sergeant remained silent.

"A good number of the rank and file weren't about to concede their conclusions to the *Flood*, as you might suspect, and Danny, bein' all about a sportsman, as ye may well know, happened into a number of unfortunate accidents on the playin' fields that fall. In winter it was me hobblin' into the infirmary from that Milestone incident and who's the first face I see but the joker flirtin' with a nurse patchin' him up in the clinic. Seems there was a hockey game about at that time and he'd managed to hit the ice with his face, breakin' the both brows open at a single fall. Last I ever saw of him."

The Old Man had been standing still too long. His feet itched with little stings and his back was threatening to hitch up on one side. He took a few steps, lifting his right knee and rolling the hip like a dog unsure of whether (or not) to mark a tree. The others followed haltingly. "Now the story of… the Milestone Ride was how the *Flood* reported it - the one that was t' reconcile the populace," he huffed, "that come out of there too. The super just itchin' to haul the honourable Nicholas Flood Davin into it, like he was draggin' him by the collar and Davin a Member of Parliament by that time. You can bet he called in some markers on that one. Ended up me bein' cited by the commissioner when the only one deservin' a citation was the horse and him with even less use for it than I."

The Old Man placed his hands on his back, just above his hips and stretched, arching. "Best mount I ever had - quarter horse gelding at fifteen hands. Old Blue. Could have used some of his stock around here."

A spring on the screen door twitched and soughed as it reached for length and all the men looked to the open entrance. "Shall I put on the tea, gentlemen? You will stay for tea, sergeant?" At the top of the steps, thirty feet away, Ma and Evelyn fronted the cavern of the big house. Evelyn's hair was brushed, drawn and tied. She wore a crisp yellow dress.

The sergeant opened his mouth to speak, paused to take in sufficient breath to make sure he'd be heard.

"Joseph, would you introduce us," Ma said curtly.

Joseph pointed. "Sergeant Murphy, Constable Wright."

"That's a delectable offer… Mrs. Kelly, is it? That's a delectable offer, Mrs. Kelly, and we thank you for it. But we're a bit thin on time and we were of a mind to get a look at some of that fine horseflesh down to the stock barn there."

The sergeant nodded towards the barn down near the valley.

He turned to Joseph and started slowly for the barn. "D' ye suppose we might have a look-over down to the paddock?"

The constable gawked at the machine shed like a bird dog - incredulous, swung a wide-eyed gaze back to the sergeant.

The sergeant and the Old Man sauntered away between the house and the machine shed, engaged, chatting. The uncles waited for the constable, followed him down. The women watched, Ma's hand resting lightly on her little charge.

"Four hundred thousand," the Old Man was saying, "four hundred thousand horses lost to the African conflict, difficult for a man t' grasp that kind of number. Twenty-nine of our nurses we could well understand. A brother, a son, a favourite uncle – that was the knowin' of the thing. But the horses, the generous swath cut from our own herds was a powerful affliction wouldn't entirely be reflected for some year to come. Not just the workin' stock, but the prime breedin' stock as well. Darned lucky we were to cut a few nags free of the Service – start up this place – before they got their mustard up again over there and kicked off the big war."

"You were sayin' of a fine mount ye had," Murphy piped, shambling while his eyes scoured the barn, the rail fence, the back of the shed, the frame hung with hay. "The Milestone ride." He was on alert behind his lounging figure, scrutinizing while the Old Man ruminated. They wandered off down the rail fence towards the barn, but there was something here, he could smell it, and he shot the constable an emphatic glance, bent a tiny nod and speared a glimpse at the shed, the rack at the edge of the paddock.

"Ah, yes. Blue Boy. Commissioner called him that, called him under the B as a kindness t' me for relievin' his senior veterinary officer. It was no rescue, mind you, not like rescuin' the Swede," the Old Man snorted, "or havin' the very same commissioner out rescuin' his besmirched super, directin' the Flood for a man in dutch with everyone, the townfolk and the barracks both." They were paralleling the length of the barn now, approaching a holding pen next to the fence where a single splendid Percheron stallion stood. A lustrous dapple grey, he was coloured

almost as the weathered fence. The sergeant scanned it all quickly, ran his eyes down the line of shining rails to where they leaped over the brow of the valley and into the grey-green brush visible at its rim. The woody smell of horse and manure mixed with the vinegar of urine, and invaded the course of his investigation, swirling into the vale with his view. Breezing back, occasionally, up over the lip was the musty, musky scent of sage. "The vet and I had seen duty on a couple o' long marches north all carryin' lengthy strings o' stock and we'd made some acquaintance, we two. Well there he was, a few years on, senior horse doctor at his first big sale with the commissioner, expected to inspect a couple o' hundred animals, and no more help than a pair o' constables didn't know hock from cheek - but chock full o' talk and vinegar - and he hears I'm transferrin' over B Division. So he sends word can I come give a look, see the stock back to Regina. Telegram he sent. Arrived to the CO in Calgary – came from the Commissioner's Office so the vet knew darned well it wasn't like he was askin' at all.

"What he didn't know was that I was due for a remount myself, didn't know it was me waitin' on him. But the E Division knew and wasn't a one of 'em didn't find some humour in Joe Kelly takin' old Eager two hundred miles t' find his own remount, and not knowin' what was t' be had on getting' there. 'Twas Eager I'd inherited in arrivin' at E, give to me by a sergeant said a horseman should have such a ride. I didn't dare t' tell him that t' my mind the big thoroughbreds were a bit delicate for police work and their breeding it seemed never let 'em adapt to the country."

As they cleared the corner of the barn, the sergeant caught a glimpse of the last

horse as it, too, walked out of the shade on the north side and disappeared, southbound, around the east. (The horses had noticed men at the fence near the rack of hay and ambled over in (dubious) anticipation of an early feeding.) The Old Man gestured at the unseen herd, turned back, continuing, and the two men retraced their way. "His official name was Elegant Earl, called up under E Division, but I didn't much care fer Earl. Wasn't hardly a season he hadn't trouble with his legs and a wheezin' rattle in his chest, but he was a gamer. Game enough, I'd say, skittish but game enough, he was – not the fastest nor the longest steamin' but I'll tell ye at a contest sprung up around detachment he run the sergeant's Wyoming broncho into a stagger and cleared any blemish of coyness might have remained from spoilin' that man's face. It was after that I started in callin' him Eager – always had a suspicion the sergeant figured me t' chafe under the label was laid on that horse and I wasn't about to pass up the chance to fling off a badge felt like a dead hen hung rottin' on a no-good dog.

"So Eager it was he became and remained for the rest of his days. Bright bay gelding at a whiff over sixteen hand. Just couldn't pull free of his breeding: two soles with fallen frogs – what Regiment mistook for founder – chest still rattlin'… and half blind to boot when we stepped out to report to the veterinary officer. 'Twas a grand fare-ye-well, the departin'. Took place before the lot of 'em – near to walkin' a gaunlet, I'd say. We left the detachment amongst a scatterin' of chuckles – Eager would stumble, start and prance like a Lippizanner passin' through a cloud o' hornets and I'd be ridin' as tall as I could stretch, pretendin' like every mount should have such a gait and hopin' t' Jesus he didn't go down

until we were out of sight. Carried me right to Fort Macleod. Eventually found a gait – pacing, one whole side then the other, what they call a learned gait – wasn't naturally disposed to trippin' him up so often. Nearly sawed me in half at the waist.

"Vet had a listen to him there, at the Fort, said he had a rheumatoid chest – founder… took a smell of him and said right off he was diabetic – first I learned of his failin' sight. He was a cracker, that vet, read a horse like a book and didn't miss a dot." The Old Man turned towards the rails as they completed the length of the barn and passed its corner. He placed his hands on the smooth top pole, hung a boot on the bottom and looked across the end of the building to where the horses were filing past in a few loose lines. They were a handsome collection, evident in the sergeant's eye, but the pause also allowed the policeman to inspect the far-side fence and the seeded field behind.

"What would it be, then, that such a fine example of a veterinary officer could be lacking, orderin' up relief, as you call it, to the buyin' of a few bronchos?" the sergeant asked without a glance at the elder.

"Well, I'll tell ye - imagination it was, imagination. A horseman's got t' be a creature of imagination. The vet had scales and meters and instruments of every sort but he hadn't the apparatus of fancy to take the full measure of an animal. Wasn't hardly an ounce of invention in the man. Oh, he could imagine the commissioner strippin' the hide from his carcass fer duff purchase but he couldn't muster the enterprise to call a difference on that pair of colt, let's say." The Old Man flipped a bony mitt off the rail toward two clumsy-looking Percheron colts

romping about the plodding streams of horses. "He'd never see the one tossin' his head high and straight back, the other, there, bringin' his nose right near the turf and tossin' back with a little loop. The one wantin' t' lead, t' stay ahead and the other wantin' t' do everything all at a time and just bustin' t' follow some proposition. Now a man speculatin' on them two alone would look t' the one buckin' and kickin' all in good line, there, and – look here – givin' us that indignant flanking glance before peelin' away. Struttin' too. And the other one wigglin' and leapin', boltin' like a wormy puppy. The one's gonna win ye some races but always be fightin' the bit, always difficult. The other'll go to the ends of the earth for ye. Blunt nosed, too – what you're lookin' for in draft stock – tells ye right off they're dogged. Good workin' brute.

"Y' see that sharp-nosed mare, there, the roan quarter horse just right of the colts now – fine carriage, regal carriage, wouldn't ye say. But she's always of that posture, the arched neck, the head drawn back – wary as a wildcat, she is. Too skittish fer a good pleasure mount. Might make a cutter. But she'll throw some fine foals.

"It's sure I'm not tellin' ye anything, sergeant, but ye can see how a fella might find himself confounded relyin' on readings from all sort o' advanced methods and gadgets, and not able to picture the account was laid out right there in front of him." The Old Man slipped his foot from the lower rail, extended a palm down the fence line towards the others.

Feeling somehow snookered, sensing the looming possibility that he'd be outmanoeuvred, the sergeant reluctantly interrupted his interrogation of the field,

drew back from the fence and turned to continue on. "That's almighty profound, Kelly. Sure it's not Will Rogers, Cowboy Philosopher, I'm attendin'?" The horses continued to gather near the fence at the far end of the paddock, pretty well obscuring the open end of the hay rack. The young men were further to the right.

"Well, Rogers, now, Rogers won his own fame tellin' stories all over again the way he seen 'em – and seems he hit the bullseye with a lot o' folk, just like I was sayin' of the veterinary officer. Vet knew what was bein' discovered to him was starin' him in the face from the start. He seen it in Blue.

"When I pulled up on Eager, didn't hardly touch a toe to the ground but the vet had me with him out surveyin' horseflesh, and me feelin' like my north half was about to topple off. Spent the next day and all night inspectin' fer the purchase particulars on eight or ten lots. Bloody exhausting.

"Now the vet knows I'm due fer a remount so he says why don't I pick out my own. Well, I wouldn't want it said that I was one holdin' a man t' churn in his own guilt so I allowed as how I'd let the vet shake free of his fetters – pressin' me 'nd Eager into service, wheezin', hitchin' and lurchin' across knobs 'n' plains 'n' such, ye see. So I took him up, and now it's me bringin' the vet off t' survey. Took him straight back t' one we'd passed over on account o' colour. He was a gem, that horse, as straight and hale as you could ask. And the vet knew it was t' be that very animal, his face droppin' even before we got back t' the lot. Could 'a' spent all day gawkin' of the same mind, he could have, like that bunch back at E: jeerin' and leerin' and never seein' any better. But there he was. And there was Blue - the sun just up, leavin' a sprinkle of brass on every thing, and him

standin' there glossy black like he was just combed out, a blue sheen ripplin' over him – colour of a B♭ bugle blast, I'd say.

"The vet stops right there, right next t' Blue. He's discoverin' that his eye is a sight better than he thought, but he's got a problem… Ye see this liver chestnut here, sergeant, appaloosa markings on the croup? Well, Blue Boy had a rump after that one, only the rump white and, with him, carryin' black and grey spotting with blue haloes. Not what the Force called 'good colour.' So the vet looks hard at that spotty rump, looks hard back at me, mumbles a question he's already got the answer for, and heads straightaway t' plead my case with the commissioner.

"As it turned out, the commissioner says buy the animal but he can't carry the fused MP, he'll have t' be branded scout stock, with the S.

"Well, we sold Eager off in a factory lot and picked up Blue for seventy-five dollars when the goin' rate was about a hundred and a quarter – an' that didn't hurt our relations none with the commissioner, at that. Branded him a scout pony but the commissioner come down and called him under the B himself before we're even out o' the Fort – deemed him Blue Boy. Never heard a complaint nor so much as a mention around it in all my time with Blue in B Division, but I think the commissioner knew that someday we'd see that scout tag mockin' the police mark, and the policy.

"Come to be, that mockin', in the Swede story, in the Milestone ride, it did - and it don't much matter how Perry figured it. Perry and the *Flood*. I read the story and couldn't hardly believe my own antics – anticipatin' the storm and divinin' th' plight o' th' Swede. The *Flood* said it was 'not divulged to this reporter how

the mountie knew of the Swede's foray.' And I guess that was true enough, seein' as how I told the blighter straight out I hadn't a hint of the man's situation, wasn't aware of my own location if all were told. Blue it was come right up on the fella. I figured us t' be fifteen mile away, off track that is. Lit out that mornin' fer Claybank and wound up in Milestone." Reflecting a second, the Old Man continued. "Might 'a' been twenty miles - and we weren't any more than thirty mile south at the startin'. Telegraph office was reportin' a storm in the north but you'd never have guessed fer a blizzard in that kind o' cold - better than forty below and still as stone, the snow stiff through but hollow soundin' - and shriekin' out every time ye laid down a boot or a shoe. Well, we were about ten mile out I'd say when up she come, howlin' like a banshee, hissin' and spittin' and ice pellets flyin' like red-hot needles in the very breath of her. Out of the north west she come and not a whisper 'til there ye were facin' into the eye of a blowtorch. Lost the trail in the first couple minutes I'd suppose and I figured us t' be driftin' east so I kept up pullin' Blue left, but I couldn't hardly see and I had t' speculate on our location. Impossible it was t' keep up lookin', anyways. So when Blue come to a stop right there next to the Swede, I'd had my head tucked into the collar of my buffalo coat since about the third time thawin' my eyeballs. I was wearin' a bearskin hat and I was bent over until the hat pulled into the collar as well and I could free up my eyes with breathin'. Must 'a' been hours like that. Prodded Blue three or four times, then, before I hazarded t' look and a couple more before I could make out the man. He was crouched over like he was still leanin' into the rope of the tin sled he had trailin' out behind him and he was

headed straight into the wind. Plastered he was, just plastered with snow, and standin' there right beside him I could swear about half the time that he'd never been there at all. The collar of his coat had long ago fallen flat, and when I dropped off next to him I could see the snow piled up along it and across his shoulders. There was another little drift runnin' down the back of his neck to the pile at the collar and over the nape and down the middle of his back. The top part fell off and went tumbling in the blow when he turned his head to look up at me. I was hollerin' for all I was worth over the blast and he was lookin' at me like we were bent over a binder or some such modern mechanism and him explainin' some point of discussion around our examination. So I tried listenin' while he spilled his thoughts into that ragin' tide but, of course, it was of no account and finally… well, until at last I just began t' clear the snow from his neck and he left off speakin' altogether.

"Tough bugger he was, that Swede. And he wasn't Swedish, ye know - he was a Dutchman. Lars. Lars de Witt. Bit of a singer and speaker, an actor, at least until the woman left. Probably wasn't much of a farmer…," he trailed off, but returned quickly, firmly, "and the woman had already left. Two days he waited, certain she'd return, afraid t' leave lest she come back and him gone. She left him with the four girls and a day's coal and nary a horse exceptin' an old lame mare. So it wasn't long they started in burnin' wood – lumber and cladding from one o' the buildings – with the milk iced over and the preserves freezin' to the wall in the pantry. Wood just wouldn't throw the heat.

"On the third day he struck out fer Milestone lookin' fer hard coal and found

himself starin' into the teeth of the storm within a few miles. Tried fer the neighbour's place then and got himself lost. Figurin' on a greater chance of findin' the town than any farm and knowin' he was headed straight into her when he begun, he headed that way again. Ended up stuck in that crouch, face down and leanin' into the tempest where we found him - where Blue found him. Nearly fused he was, couldn't straighten a mite at the waist nor hardly bend his arms and he moved in bursts at the knees like they were old creakin' hinges glued over with rust. Had a time, we did, hoistin' his arse into the saddle."

The Old Man paused just an extra moment and when he caught a flicker in the sergeant's site inspection, the Old Man continued smartly. "Had him laid across the bridge on his belly, and battlin' the blizzard t' keep him there, when he managed t' hook a knee around the horn and spin his frame - rigid as he was - into the arms of that tall western saddle tree. Arse t' the pommel he ended up, and there I was havin' t' lift his face from Blue's rump t' untie the blanket rolled behind the saddle. Had my big buffalo coat off in one hand and waggin' in the torrent like a lard-arsed goose an' Lars leanin' into the other while I'm tryin' t' gain the blanket from under without losin' 'im. I got the blanket plastered to the windward side of him, then pulled it over his head and pinned it against his chest when pushin' him upright. Wasn't no way t' get that coat onto him and around the two of us with him all bent up, and the wind was drivin' through the serge o' my tunic and rakin' across my hide like a line o' saw teeth. So I snugged up tight to the cantle and sprung his arms open like a couple o' pincers until I could get myself between them, get his head on my shoulder. That way it was just his legs

stickin' up out the back. And leavin' the coat on and leavin' it open, I could hold the both of us on by gettin' one arm down each side of him and hangin' onto the horn. And him mostly inside, swaddled up tight. About the last I done fer 'im, I'd say. Bent my head forward and turned up the collar. Looped the reins between my fingers before clampin' on to the saddle horn just so Blue wouldn't be steppin' on them. Left the stirrups empty and my legs dangling down the flanks and left old Blue to take us home."

The older men stepped out of the matted path and into one of the blotches of silt that stained the yard of long, blonde grasses. Coils of warm dust squirted and swirled from beneath their boots as they approached the uncles and the constable. A prairie boy, the constable had drawn a slender sliver of grass from a sheath where a gently wagging leaf left the stem and, as he'd seen so many others do, nibbled the soft tip, gnawed the fibrous stalk as he idled with the other two. The horses were polarized, most at the south fence, all standing still, twitching an ear here, switching a tail there, and all facing south toward the hay frame, the machine shed.

"Wasn't 'til Blue stopped we realized that we'd arrived. Stopped right up to the barn, he did. Couldn't tell ye how long it was we sat swayin' in the gale and Blue holdin' steady on a great patch o' piss at the door but when I hazarded a look up, I suppose it was fer lack of pitchin' and rollin'. The weight of the two of us was just enough t' send Blue Boy's back end through the crust on the snowdrifts every couple o' steps so we'd seen plenty o' jarrin' and stumblin'. Must 'a been holdin' those hind quarters in tension all along, preparin' to crack the surface at any time,

but it seemed it was all at a sudden ye could decipher a tremblin' there, standin' on the ice. Took some urgin', it did, t' get him to forsake that big barn door.

"Had t' be a house near abouts and movin' down the length of the barn, we come to where the fence run up to the corner of it and straightaway included a gate. Now the gate pointed up a little rise and, sure enough, up to a house you could just make out on the rise. Wasn't so much the storm any more obscurin' the place as it was the darkness closin' like a fist around the shape o' the dwellin'."

A trickle picked its way down the sergeant's neck while the wings of hoppers snapped and chattered on the light air and a red-winged blackbird fluted from a reed in the valley. Still as it was, the grassy sweet smell of cut timothy carried on the air and as the midday summer heat pressed across the mountie's shoulders, it seemed to possess a density – a density that appeared like a falls stalling, backing up down low, near the bottom of the hay rack, where he could see the air piling up on itself. But the fluid ripple was only a flicker, as if he'd only imagined it.

"'Twas lamplight squeezin' out from under the window coverings like it was squirtin' between the fingers o' that fist first caught our attention…and when we mounted the rise, ye could see just the faintest glow comin' through the blinds, too, where they hadn't any figures painted on 'em. Like ye were candlin' an egg. Oriental blinds they were and on every window in the place. Must 'a run old Lars a small fortune – that and the linoleum. He put a linoleum floor in the woman's kitchen, he did. In those days there wouldn't have been a place south of Regina could boast of that kind of immoderation.

"The four girls were gathered around the furnace in the living room when we

showed up, they said, what with the wind wickin' away any heat the lamps might 'a thrown and more. Scared the bejesus out of 'em when I dropped old Lars up the steps. Had a time, I did, getting the man off the horse. His left hand had slipped through the coat collar and up behind my head somewhere along. It's a sight we must've cut out on the lonesome prairie - him with his legs raised up like some kind o' broncho buster and his one hand up behind my head like we were passin' some audience on parade, salutin' to the rear. But once I got the arm out and slipped to the ground myself, I wasn't long discoverin' my feet t' be solid as blocks…and it was in luggin' Lars to the door that one ankle just turned over, as far as the boot would allow, and I scattered the two of us up the steps with a great boom and a clamour. We went a staggerin' right through the door when I got him hoisted up again, seein' the door opening a crack when we were yet on the stair and thrown wide then as we approached. The one girl, Mary, was standin' at the door in the porch. The other three were lined up together on the far side of the kitchen, steam risin' off 'em, watchin' us steppin' in with a wobble, the breath of the two of us rollin' into the porch. Stood there a moment, the lot of us, me bearin' their old man over my shoulder like a side o' beef, until the one, Mary, pointed through the big arch joinin' the porch to the kitchen. Now the little one - one o' the twins, the one they all doted on and such – spoke up to impress the new visitor, ye see, sure as she was of charmin' everyone all over again, and grandly pointin' out the shinin' floor. 'Momma gotta noli meum!' says she.

"Well, I was already stumblin' towards the kitchen, imaginin', I'd suppose, the little playmates out around the mother's skirts in front o' the oven on the smooth,

warm floor…when at the last moment it struck me like a slap, and I figured what was just then comin'. There I was, then, with a stride hung danglin' over the gleamin' floorin' and a picture of the heel landing like a post maul on a turkey platter flashin' through my thought. Now as I recall, wouldn't ye know, it no sooner struck me but the full weight of the Swede 'n me brought that frozen boot down rattlin' on the frozen linoleum, sendin' it shattering - splintering and skittering over itself, scattering over the planking like a flight o' crickets in a root cellar box. Had 'em all paralysed, the girls, while the two of us shuddered to a standstill in the middle o' the mess."

The sergeant, it seemed, had come to fixate on the rack with its shower of hay crowning the earth like a thatch roof above sod walls, the thick grass a brilliant blond on top, at the peak. He noticed the lick of light at the crest. He could feel an imperative, a charm, around the rack, his own movement causing a flame of light to dance along the bright ridge, trailing a persistent tail. And the incandescent daubs of brilliance spattered his eye in reflection, tossing out tall rectangles of pink, needle points of vivid blue and slivers of mauve. The rack itself seemed to breathe: a sip, surreptitious, passing just the slimmest leak, a tiny trembling.

The sergeant's preoccupation grew, in the Old Man's notice, towards a fascination. "Ululate," he offered, trumpeting, "ululate."

Sergeant Murphy turned involuntarily towards the curious warbling and found old Joseph peering, already talking. "What my mother used to call ululatin'. That's what it was broke the grip holdin' those girls. At the first, there in the kitchen, it

was a little moan, barely escapin', like just the creak of a boot or the squeak of a pail handle. But in around the furnace where Mary herded 'em, had 'em huddle up to their old man, they watched their own father dumbfounded at first. Watched him rollin' in and out of consciousness, stammerin', smackin' his lips, speakin' in false starts, just makin' noises really, spittin' out parts o' words now 'n again – an' them clutchin' him close the whole time, like Mary'd told 'em. Him blottin' up their heat. She was gone, Mary - takin' Blue down to the barn - and Lars would take t' heavin' in little fits and tremors every time them girls seemed to get settled in.

"Then it's Mary comin' back with the saddle bags; I was in the practice o' carryin' a load o' good hard coal in one and fillin' the other with oats. So we get a good roar goin' in the furnace and it's then I'm sure I'm not t' be removin' my boots, feelin' the feeling returnin', my feet swellin' up tight against the leather like it's someone shriekin' into a pillow. Now old Lars is thawin' out, too, an' his eyes start floppin' open and rollin' around and his mouth flops open with his tongue rollin' about and the girls finally break out o' that spell, all at once washed over with a horror at the sight of him. But then a kind of sorry resolve sets into 'em… and when the blood started singin' through him, he sang out, too, and the girls – seein' right in front of them their father's utter vulnerability – huddled up tighter still to the howler in the centre of 'em.

"It wasn't really a howlin', mind you, cultured animal that he was; it was that ululatin', a yowl – a long, thin, fluting yodel. Peeled off the stiff creature clapped twistin' in the bundle like some kind o' wind chime. He sung down to a growl, to

a rattle, and up to a thread, layin' it on and fallin' off over and over again, then driftin' in and out, waning the more each time, until the one and the lot of us followed and (finally) slipped into sleep." He'd gestured with a sweep and a flip of his finger.

"'Twas Mary, bangin' the furnace, brought us all to. Even Lars was with us, blinkin' out about the place fer a bit. She had a pot o' snow meltin' on top fer pourin' down the pump in the kitchen and she was liftin' a few heavy stones into the front. Coal was nearly gone. Those girls had tea and warm bread 'n side pork and the cutter waitin', all ready to go before daybreak. Mary'd brought the cutter up, with Blue and the lame mare hitched t' the double tree and my saddle laid across the seat – and she no more than fifteen years. Got the girls and the hot rocks and Lars bundled up in the cutter, Lars blabberin' and yankin' about with twitchin' now and then an' me drivin', sittin' on a saddle… and we struck out for the neighbour's place Lars had been lookin' t' find. When we left there was nothin' remainin' of the night but a few struggling embers and a box of dead cinders… and the shards of the shattered floor boxed up down to the cellar."

The sergeant turned back towards the rack, was struck by the tangle just visible through the straight strands and couldn't help but imagine the hay an inverted nest, capping the earth. The low skirts of the thatch sucked inward as convection action made a chimney of the overturned nest, like an old Case engine with 'gravity' cooling – the air heated around the radiator rising, pulling cooling air over the vertical fins where it, too, was heated and, also rising, then perpetuating the flow.

Clicking and ticking down, the car – the rack's content – clinked, like horses standing in harness, as it continued to cool. The heat source under the skirts set the seed of combustion deep in the fresh timothy, damp green grass that should have been airily drying. The proximity of the horses kept Sergeant Murphy from quite distinguishing what he was hearing. The sway and bob of the low grass disguised the drops of grease that fell, underneath, to stain the earth like drips of cowshit. But despite a clear understanding and in spite of the feeling that he was overtaxing their authority and their rightful claim to welcome, the sergeant found himself somehow intrigued by the object.

Kennedy and the constable dallied to the west of the rack and Kennedy was some ten feet or so closer to it when he happened to glance toward the shed. From this vantage point, he could see the groove Seamus had ploughed dragging the crowbar alongside, and it was certain the sergeant wouldn't be overlooking the sharp line it drew through the silt and grass, arcing over to the gaping rack. Seamus started towards the rack, flanking, along with the sergeant. The constable was still kneeling, one heel pinned under his butt, the knee nearly touching down, the other foot forward, the knee high, his elbow resting on the thigh. As Seamus passed close to the prone mountie, he paused to lift his left heel, cock the knee and fart a long and hoarse bark note. It was expelled, rasping, into the contemplative countenance of the constable, who, thunderstruck, instinctively propelled himself backwards in a duckwalk across the slippery grass where it had been flattened to a slick mat. He opened his mouth and he pumped his jaw, and he threw his arms out wide and waved them in little circles in order to regain his

balance.

The sergeant had turned toward the spectacle. Presently he commented. "Well, you know what they say…: A fartin' horse will never tire, a fartin' man's the one t' hire."

He looked to the Old Man. "I guess y' could say the bloom is off the rose," he offered, and stepped between the sputtering constable, who had staggered to his feet, and the fierce-eyed Seamus. "D' y' suppose we could have your lad, here, show us back there t' the car, along the cool side o' the shop?"

Kennedy was already shoving his brother into the open space between the rack and the shed where a thick strip of shade was painted along the north wall and disappeared around the east side. To the north of the rack and just out its shadow, a crowbar leaned, gleaming, against a fence post. It was everything he could do not to appear panicked and it finally occurred to him – he was suddenly aware that Seamus had planned to be discovered, expected a confrontation, and probably intended to burn the cop.

Constable Wright wasn't about to run down his sergeant to get to Seamus, who continued to move, reluctantly, at his brother's prodding. But the young cop's fists were clenched and his jutting lower jaw was trained solidly on the big man.

The Old Man sauntered by and thrummed away, "Well, ol' Blue leaned into the double tree and took up a 4/4 time. And the mare, Linnea, stumbled to startin', with a falter and a wobble every fourth step, sendin' a shudder through the cutter, but there was no refusin' to it. That big mare fell into a matching step and the two of 'em settled in to a steady stumping along. Would 'a been a heavy haul with a

lone quarter horse, sturdy or no.

"What with the cutter thumpin' over the stiff drifts and Lars twitchin' and startin' in fits and with me perched up on my saddle, it wasn't 'til we were just short o' the neighbourin' place that I come to realize the mare was lame. Ruined she was by that time but still game, still pullin' right along side the steadyin' o' th' quarter horse. Y' see Blue wasn't breakin' through the drifts so much anymore, just when there was a heavy pull or when the mare was goin' down."

The sergeant continued to head off the corporal, each tack veering slightly westward. The time served to cool the younger man and he was again engaged in following the pursuits of his sergeant when they approached the big door at the back of the shed. They marched along behind the uncles, slowing as they passed the place where the door stood off from the frame, leaving a vertical crack broken only by the bar of the latch. It was a last-ditch try on the part of the sergeant and the first incorporation of the constable's long-anticipated course of investigation that saw them peering through the crack as they passed, only to witness a slice of light from the door on the far side of the shop cutting starkly through the gloom.

"Wasn't a creature stirrin' in the harsh bright cold at the neighbour place when we come lumbering in like a founderin' ship, what with the long tree juttin' out the front like it was meant for a jib sail. The woman there took one look at Lars and sent 'em all scramblin'. Family of boys it was. The oldest boy hitched up a proper team and cutter while the old man and I unhitched Blue and the mare, Linnea. She was in bad shape and we left her there, me and Blue and the old man and the older boy, before we picked up Mary and Lars and the rocks from the

house. Left her and the place in the charge of one o' the other older boys. I was still saddlin' Blue when the old man got t' tellin' the young fella what he was to do for the mare. The mare would only stand still, wobblin', a few seconds and then hobble around a few steps. I could see the boy toss a glance at a gun was hangin' over one of the stalls on his way to the oat bin and it seems the old man noticed too. Before we left, when the lad returned with the oats, the man announced, 'There ain't gonna be no shootin' in the barn. If ya got t' knock 'er down, use the post maul.'

"By the time we were half a mile out - me on Blue, lookin' back, the rest of 'em in the cutter - the place was all buttoned up again. Buildings all shinin' silver. Sky that piercing, brutal blue laid over a horizon straight as a knife edge, with just the odd spangle frostin' the still air. Every thing brilliant, as sharp and clear as a soprano note, as I recall, exceptin' a dark dot markin' the wall o' the barn – and a high-blown raven flappin' away, winkin' in and out o' the picture in the light shimmerin' off his own back. About as frigid a landscape as you're ever likely t' see. Funny thing about it, though - that same hostile colour couldn't have seemed any more hospitable when we come up on Corinne.

"We'd passed right through Milestone upon discoverin' doc Zimmerman not there. Old Lars was in bad shape, flagging fast - limp, gaggin'…and we wouldn't be leavin' him to the hotel. So we had to chase down Gust – Zimmerman's name was August – over to Corinne. Another five miles. Lars about t' slip away at one step to the next. Mary steadyin' him and calmin' herself. Made each mile seem about ten time.

"You could see the town from a couple miles out and then, the next thing, ye could see the sign on George's Kora Café for half a mile or more. George and Irene. He was a Greek, George – Papadopoulos. Had a big sign on the front of his place – crazy-lookin' sign and coverin' the upper half o' the building and not at all like the block black and white or green and white with just the print and a line border. No border and the whole thing a picture like you'd see painted t' hang on a wall, only it was the wall. Brilliant blue sky against golden fields – same blue as was in that sterile sky, nearly, but with wheat sheaves and Greek maids and golden hair piled up and blue eyes 'nd gatherers in white garments all gathered up – a sight we were just plenty glad t' be drawin' up under about that time anyways, I might say.

"The doc was there and we carried old Lars through the cafe and right through the kitchen to the room he'd taken at the back. Gust and Mary and Irene fell t' tendin' around Lars so I went with George t' see the other two off back to Milestone and the farm."

The men bobbed their heads in unison as they mounted the little rise between the shop and the house, trudging, the Old Man's dip a bit sharper, deeper, more of a jerk, at every second stride.

"Now the old man wasn't hardly about to leave without a healthy samplin' of George's famous ouzo, but it wasn't more than one snort had crossed his gullet and Irene appears in the café," he panted. "'Yeorgi...,' she says, soft as can be, like she's admonishin' a child, and off she goes. That's all. Well, it's one more snort and the bottle disappears, allowin' the others an early start back and leavin'

me 'n Blue a chance to get our business done over t' Claybank and still make Depot if we had to.

"Doc Zimmerman told me I was t' have my feet tended over to the Depot infirmary as soon as I could get there, said Lars was in tough, the three of 'em rubbin' him down, said the one foot was kaputt and he wouldn't be travellin' for some time. We straightaway struck out, we two – Blue and I – intendin' fer Claybank, after beggin' the doctor free of a few bandages. Did up Blue's fetlocks – every one of 'em a mess, torn and bloody from breakin' through the crust on those hard drifts with Lars 'n me.

"Same thing as happens to game, deer and moose mostly...ye see 'em around the townsites, where the wolves won't venture, tryin' to keep from getting' torn up and tracked down when there's a crust on the snow. Wolves'll track 'em. The wolf stays on top, doesn't break the surface, just walks 'em down 'til they're hobbled up and strugglin' – matter of about a day or so and the animal's finished. I've seen Indians do it too.

"The telegraph run through Claybank but it was fallin' unserviceable, and, wouldn't ye know it, just then when we were passin' through. So we wouldn't be spendin' any extra time there, waitin' around for a party t' be sent out from Division looking for us. Headed straightaway fer Depot. 'Twas black as pitch when we arrived but the stable was still lit up with a number of lamps. Seemed the telegraph had been returned t' service and we were expected. But wasn't a word said by a one o' the men there around the mess Blue Boy looked. Lamps all around lightin' 'im up, bandages trailin'out bloody and tattered, him standin'

carryin' must 'a been ten pound of ice, danglin'off 'im like decorations ye'd see in pictures of a camel, all down the one side of him. And standin' there with that great spotty rump, that S brand shinin' off his shoulder. Wasn't so much a mock of an MP mount as he was a mockery…sure enough a mockery. Didn't one, not one, of the regular mounts complete a patrol on either of the last two days, not even those deliverin' ration t' Thunder Creek, to the camp at Thunder Creek. So it wasn't a word come out of those boys, they just set to carin' for 'im, then looked up at me like I was contaminatin' the place, told me I'd best get on over to the clinic."

The sergeant slowed to give the old man a chance to catch his breath. The Old Man stopped. He heaved a deep breath, then another. A black Ford rushed past the front of the machine shed and up to the house, causing a wall of dust to erupt, standing static along the drive and obscuring the little group of men on the rise. Casey and Mabel scurried into the big house - their manic chatter chucked back and fro, swirling tight as a dust devil along their path - anxious to untie their new-bought packages, and tossing no more than a passing glance at the cruiser in the yard. A cascade of gobbles and chortles wafted across from the new place as Patty and Mary Robin passed (too closely) by Patrick's latest come-lately scheme: a pen of turkeys – turkeys that piled up against the wire fence at the thought of feeding; turkeys that riled the incredulous Robin to railing just about any time she thought of them. "The only animal that hasn't the wits to step around the corner and duck into the shelter in a hailstorm. Just stand there and get killed. Not half a brain among the whole works, and thirty cents each!"

"I was some good time gettin' into the clinic at that hour, and I was about t' leave when I caught sight o' myself in one o' th' black panes... and I was holdin' myself by the face, turnin' one cheek in to admire a couple o' big waxy spots when the light come swingin' up behind and there I was lookin' a bad-tempered nurse straight in the eye from about the end of my nose. Once I was in, though, I was some sweet time gettin' out as well."

Casey came tripping down the big step, gambolled up short at the Ford. He was thirty-one, tanned, loose and lean and a thick shock of hair splayed across his forehead, giving his easy good looks a further boyish touch. He grinned at the Old Man and snatched a last pair of packages from the car.

The sergeant had exaggerated an interest in the young man's activity, and so the Old Man made the introduction straightaway. "My son Casey." He held a spade-like hand out to the policemen. "This is Sergeant Murphy and Corporal Wright." He interjected when he saw the sergeant about to speak, though he wasn't sure quite why, but his instincts had been alerted. "We were just goin' over the story of the Swede – old Lars – and I was rememberin' my stay in the Depot clinic to the sergeant, here." He turned his face to the mountie - whose attention was fixed on Casey and the purchases - and as he did so, stepped part way into the visual corridor between the two. It should have signalled a move along towards the police cruiser, but the sergeant stayed firm, so the Old Man went on.

"The horse was the one carried the thing off and I was the one layin' around, off duty, carryin' on for a week or so. And that was no easy task. The place was administered by the Chief Surgical Officer and that bunch, but it was run by the

Sisters of Mary… and the Sisters of Hope, too, I guess – though you didn't see much of them. Might've been the same outfit… but, anyways it was the Sisters for ye, unless you were lucky enough to run into one o' the civilians trainin' there, like Danny did. There wasn't no dealin' with the Sisters, and that was a fact. I talked to the sergeant at the time, after about three days in, told him I was fit as a fiddle (and I was feelin' like I was in stir)… just my feet were black, was all – no blisters left, and just a bit tender to touch, but he says no, the Sisters won't hear of a release. So there I sat with my feet propped up on the end o' the bed for the best part of a week." The sergeant was still focused on the young Kelly, in spite of the elder's further incursion into his line of sight, and he smiled amicably at the handsome man with the still-shining eyes. Casey returned the smile and cocked one knee, parking himself – since the others had halted, waiting on the sergeant – and tossed back an inquisitive glance for whatever it was that the mountie wanted to say.

"Now I might 'a known something was comin', seein' Flood Davin around there a couple of days in a row, with a growing crowd of crones. And I'd seen a number of lads - with real ailments - kicked out t' be makin' up some o' th' vital winter patrols. *Flood* arrived on the Friday with the Swede's girls, Perry and Herchmer, a story of the stock returned, and a sketch artist. And a collection of chortlers, like turkeys, all runnin' one way, pilin' up against the fence t' stand in the storm, on the windward side, and a few gesturin' t' fly at any given time – hailin' themselves 'til it fairly knocked the ostrich feathers off 'em, peltin' 'em 'til they couldn't see straight." Ma and Mabel appeared on the top of the step and the Old

Man took the opportunity to look to Casey, lift his eyes and nod his head in their direction, and even wag his index finger towards their perch. Casey missed the Old Man's drift, but it wasn't lost on Ma, and she felt a shadow of dread flicker over, recognizing the light draw to his features, the slight bunch to his shoulders, and the little strain in his chuckle.

"Always suspected the *Flood* of instigating chortlers so that they might simply 'report' on a good will story – after wringin' out the feud. Superintendent Perry could only watch, and play his role, bearin' the citation for Herchmer – the Commissioner who was gonna have an end to the feud - and such. And he said nary a word when the *Flood* started in, lightin' up the ladies. Had the girls lined up on display, stiff as diestock, nothin' movin' but their eyes… the little one amazed at the great slate floor… and the Sisters standing back along the walls, lookin' on quietly with kindly eyes and little understanding smiles.

"Flood Davin said he'd been to the increasingly unsavoury town of Moose Jaw, where the weather was, of late, even less hospitable, even more brutish than had been the cruel elements here. He had observed, he said, why many of the good citizens of the community were ill advised to traverse their own downtown streets. It had been reported – and he had seen it – where proper citizens were not only fighting a blizzard gale, in their perambulations, but were assailed, as well, by the sight of pathetic and ill-dressed vagrants, probably renegades from Thunder Creek. It was disturbing particularly for women folk: vagrants surveying, scouting, staring, from the corners, and some right on Main Street. As ye might guess, this wasn't long stirrin' a righteous boil in their blood and settin'

riots ragin' on their tongues." The Old Man choked a chuckle. The sergeant stayed straight-faced, but turned a look to old Kelly.

" Told 'em they weren't at all surprised to the find the better part of the Swede's missing livestock at a yard in Moose Jaw… when he could, above the clamour. But he also mentioned that a number of the ladies had been instrumental in securing the capital necessary to persuade the proprietor of the stock yard to part with the animals without too much fuss.

"Gave the chortlers a nice cause t' their mission group and gave the frozen town something to get fired up about and they dallied around 'their' girls a time. But they never so much as looked in on Lars – messy and moanin', scabbed up and full of laudanum – and not a hundred feet down the hall. Of course they'd have t' wait 'til he was back on his feet before returnin' the stock, anyways. And the girls – the one, Mary, stayed on, trainin' at the infirmary and nursin' for Doc Zimmerman when he needed, and the others were just farmed out, waitin' on their father.

"And that's pretty much the nuts and bolts of the chronicle of the Milestone Ride, as the *Flood* would say…"

The Old Man hadn't finished, but the sergeant, who'd quietly waited his turn, cut him off, grinning back to Casey. "A great idea, that is, a great idea. Stockin' up before the fall, that is. And I'm guessin' you're right." It was then the Old Man knew what it was the sergeant would be leaving him. "I guess we all knew, ever since Czeckoslovakia, that we'd see another Price Board, just never thought to collect up sugar and tea and woollen duds." Ma, too, stiffened, shot glances at her

boys – she knew all about the seeds of war and saving the British empire with Canadian troops. "We heard just this morning that the Wartime Price and Trade Board is set t' go ahead and we'll be enforcin' rationing - my guess is some time in the fall – 'cause you can be sure it won't be long and the bloody Hun'll be breathin' down our necks again, eh? Casey, my man, I can see you're thinkin' right along those lines, anyway, but I'm tellin' ye we're goin' t' be in the thick of it and soon. They've already requisitioned space for a recruiting office in Wascana and we're hearin' Alberta's already puttin' up a building in Lethbridge. That's prairie folk – just doin' what they gotta. So once a man gets his kinfolk supplied, it'll seem only right they should send all they can t' get the thing over with, and we'll all be lookin' t' finish off the blasted Kaiser, once and for all. All of us exceptin' the Douks and the Hutterites, I should say."

He turned for the cruiser, nodded to the constable, who stepped up and strode alongside him. He paused to pull his serge straight while the constable continued on.

"What do you say, men – it's Strathcona's Light Horse for me. It would be shameful to lag, wouldn't you say, to be conscripted." He still grasped the serge below the belt and he drew it tight over his chest and grinned. "Well, we're pretty well shet of the white feather Douks, and we're workin' on the Hutterites." He strode to the big Plymouth, lifted his hat, said, "Good day to you," and slipped in to the passenger seat.

Of course, the Old Man saw red and lumbered after the lawman. He placed his hands above the open driver's window, leaned in and spoke quietly before

sending the mounties off. "Ye know, constable, it wasn't just a few horses and cattle were recalled from the meat packer's in Moose Jaw. It was that sorry woman come traipsing back as well. In them days, people had a name for a woman like that. In them days a woman like that was pretty much thought to be a tramp, and the girls (by association or maternal guidance) were considered susceptible to the same failings. Whether it was in their breeding or trained up in 'em, folks figured it t'be in their blood and you could expect that nature'd be sure to pass on the behaviour."

Ma was mortified at the thought of lending her boys – at least these three – to another "conflict." They'd been fortunate enough to have been too young for the Great War. Patrick would surely not have to go: a household and nearly thirty seven. She felt her viscera jump to her chest. She knew that her boys wouldn't be swayed in the least by the sergeant's feeble leading. But she prayed, anyway, that there'd be no reason that all her sons should be taken. She might have known better and it was a prayer she would soon regret.

Not ninety minutes later, Casey started down the rise from the big house. The boys were flecks in a valley; the Old Man was braiding a halter rope onto a ring clip over at Patrick's bull pen; Ma, Mabel and Robin were three straw hats in a bush, stripping fat, black chokecherries from the trees on the ridge behind the new place. The uncles were an hour gone. The horses had long since disappeared to the shade. He'd have walked down at the horse trough and engaged the windmill pump if there'd been any wind. To the east, a striated sash stretched up from the hay rack, as if a brush had been dabbed in white, grey, and black, and drawn into

the sky with an unsteady hand. One of the coils of smoke that lay bedded in the hay spit upward in a lick of flame.

"Hey… hey!" he hollered at the rack. He turned to the new place and yelled, "He-ey!…Heeey!" and ran down the little slope. He caught a glimpse of something pink, he thought, under the stack – pink as the material of Evy's pearl buttoned sweater, her princess-wear, and he sprinted through the stringy tentacles of grass that tugged at his legs and lashed across his boots until he felt he would separate at the groin. Streamers of smoke were filtering up through the ragged edges near ground. He could see the pink flash on the flattened grass and he bounded around the end of the open "cottage" to find himself engulfed in smoke. He meant to call out but he was immediately seized at the throat and stabbed about the lungs. Instinctively he dropped down low to see, and found that he could quaff a breath there, though his face and neck still blared with heat. Sure enough, it was Evy's sweater he'd seen and he crawled over on all fours to pick it up, dragging his knee and the leg of his coveralls through a snotty gob of warm grease. It was impossible to hold the breath he'd captured – like stopping up a well spring with the heel of your shoe – and he coughed until his nose oozed and his eyes watered, but he continued to scour the earth until he was sure there was no-one else inside.

And then it was the flame – what to do with a burning frame in a field of prairie grass – that incited him. The faintest breath of wind and there'd be hell to pay, and there just might be anyway. He decided that his only chance was the potato field; his only choice was to move all thirty feet of hay past a particularly fine ripe

stand of wild oats and into the furrow and loam and green of the potato plot. Luckily there was a crowbar at the fence and he flipped up the tongue on the drawbar, took a deep pull of air, and stood on the cross piece of frame that served as a front axle where he could wield a long lever. He thrust the iron point forward and into the turf from behind the axle, faced into the smoking rack, gripping the very top of the bar, and leaned backwards, hanging all of his weight out over the front. His lanky build didn't carry the payload to allow him to move the massive rack, but the iron wheels and the fraction of slope that remained worked in his favour. By throwing his weight into the bar he was able to create a rhythm that eventually brought the hay labouring into motion. The trick was to hop off the perch at the last moment, grab breath, and remount the axle and plant the bar before the vehicle lost all momentum. And then there was steering. He had to produce sufficient speed that he could rely on its inertia even while he worked against its direction by hauling on the tongue. The speed came surprisingly easily; the steering not so. But he had the pile nicely flanking the wild oats when a burning bunch broke loose and landed in the dry patch. It was really nothing but a small clump with a cluster of embers at its centre and he ran back to stamp it out. Another fell and he stamped quickly and ran up to this latest one, a few sparks clinging to the soft fabric of his coveralls. He stamped quickly here too, seeing the rack slowing, then ran back to the front of the big wagon to be sure it had the energy to navigate the little berm that described the circumference of the garden. A further collection of little coals had lodged themselves in the shaggy fringe of his pant leg and had begun to smoulder before he'd had a chance to lay

another bar on the wagon. By the time they'd reached the west edge of the garden, the smoulder had flared and the sopped-up petroleum grease had ignited readily. He ran ahead and dragged his leg in the loose dirt, threw a couple of handfuls on and rubbed them in. The front wheels of the smoking rack had cleared the berm with a clang and it slowed quickly as they began to sink into the soft soil. Casey lunged at the frame, planted the bar and heaved, but his hands lost purchase on the slippery bar and he found himself suddenly on his butt. His breath escaped and the smoke rolled forward and he scrambled crablike to back himself out of the way. The slats on the iron wheel were worn almost flat but when they touched the toe of Casey's right boot, they pinned it fast. The rig continued to roll, driving his heel into a furrow under the left-side wheel, and rocked to a crunching halt when it tried to ride up the shin and the rear wheels nearly crested the ridge at the garden's edge.

"Aw shit," he thought, "the ass end is still round about in the damned wild oats," and he turned his head away from the smoke, even before the first wave of pain laid him straight and sent his head to the dirt. Well, that wasn't the worst of it. He really got to squirming when the burning bits of hay began rolling down the stack and showering over him. The fire had begun at the top and as it advanced, larger and larger bundles were freed up to fall. At first, he just brushed the short stalks and dusty morsels away; then he was grabbing little bouquets and sprays like pick-up sticks. But long before the twenty pound missiles that bounced and burst began falling his way, he was writhing like a bug under a magnifying glass. It seems the early incendiaries hadn't been long in igniting the skirts along the

bottom of the rack and in no more than a minute or two, everything under the rack was searing in a radiant, incinerating heat.

The boys were the first to arrive and he was still yelling, clawing and pawing at the dirt with his three free limbs when they ran up with sticks and feathers and a couple of frogs. They ran up under the angry jag of smoke that forked across the sky like a static lightning bolt and they stopped up stiff and wide-eyed at the billowing rack. There was a rush in the air as if too much breath was being expelled between close lips. The dry timothy crackled and snapped and sent glowing ash drifting upward. The greener stalks hissed and popped, and over it all, through a shimmering haze of heat and smoke, Casey moaned and yelled and ordered them to stay back. He sat up once, leaning into the heat, and grabbed the thick iron wheel spokes. He pushed and pulled in manic jerks and then fell back, leaving smoking fleshy prints on the wheel.

The women had scampered across the draw, cradling berries in their aprons as far as the big wooden bucket they'd set in a barrow, simply inquisitive at first; but then they noticed the growing dark stain in the sky, like ink dispersing itself through a linen cloth and now they ran jolting down the hill, Ma and Robin gathering their heavy dresses up in front, Mabel leading, bounding in slacks. Patrick came galloping behind in long loping strides, still gripping a length of rope, his mouth pulled low in a grimace while he sucked air through his teeth. The Old Man took the roadway and beat them down. After hobbling to the big house, he hopped in Casey's Ford and drove. He stopped at the machine shed and chucked a spade and a shovel into the car, dumped out a nail bucket and threw

that in, too. He pulled up just south of back of the rack, at the edge of the garden, and fell out the door while the car was still moving. Patrick ran up, rounding the oat field ahead of the women. He stuttered a moment at the fallen patriarch, then ran into the garden. Coming down the slope slightly to the north, he'd seen the boys gather near the front of the wagon.

Casey'd gone silent and the boys had watched, frozen, while his flannel shirt burned away and left an uneven grid of charred strips on his skin. He turned a bright red from his knee to his chin and he wagged his arms feebly as the hide swelled and split, blackened and blistered.

The boys were all prancing when Patrick got there, with fixed horrified eyes and masks of silent screams. Mabel and Robin were staggering through the furrows with the Old Man and his clutch of bright tools. Ma jumped into the half filled horse trough and ran, soaking, straight through the oat field.

"Buckets! Pails and buckets!" she called to the boys as she broke onto the scene. Trent took off, charging; Jonas trailing behind: the horse barn, the oat bin, the colt pen. Patrick struggled with the tongue, turning his face from the heat. Bobby was wrestling a pole from the rail fence. As the Old Man cleared the rack and made out the situation through the smoke, he threw the tools, as hard as he could, over near his prostrate son, turned and scrambled back towards the car, like a three-legged dog, faltering and tripping in the furrows and plants. Ma stripped off all but the least of her underthings and dropped the wet pile on her baking son. Robin watched, stunned, silent, hesitated a moment, then bolted for the trough.

Bobby bashed the sticking, crooked rail with a rock, slipping it free, and it seemed that this one act suddenly brought them all into the same plan. Bobby, just nine, ran the rail like a jousting lance straight through the spokes of the wheel. He and Ma and Patrick lined up, lifting the end of the pole to their shoulders and attempting to walk it up. Mabel scurried to Casey and attempted to drag him free by the arm pits. She turned her face down, by her husband's neck, as she heaved. But the three bending the long tree limb were having little luck lifting and by the time the Old Man returned the fine ringlets of hair along the left side of Mabel's forehead had retracted, snapping, to kinky knots, the eyebrow was beads, and the air in her nostrils bit like a bee sting.

The black Ford flew the berm, bouncing through the potato plants in an uneven arc. It passed the end of the rack, roaring and grunting in fits and starts – like a greenhorn on a trotter – as first one wheel and then the other found traction and shot dirt and stems and pitched unearthed spuds into the air in broken jets. Ribbons of loam peeled from the front rim as the wheel ploughed through the soft silt and the Old Man swung the car towards the rack. Kellys toppled and long burning needles of hay cascaded when the Old Man stormed up and bashed the front of the car against the frame – but Casey was free.

Robin shed her dress, too – sopping – onto the steaming man and Patrick poured pails of water up and down his brother until they'd pretty much created a wallow. The half-naked women took shirts from their husbands and bent to aid Casey and Mabel while the men used the crowbar to unfold the bumper and pull the fender back off the wheel. The boys slapped the grass and the oats with wet pants and

shirts and coveralls from the shed while the rack raged away, dropping ashes and embers even after they'd tied on the car and yanked it back to the garden. When Ma said they could, Patrick and Joseph loaded up Casey and Mabel and headed off, barebacked, for the Victoria hospital.

It was the smell, Ma thought, the inescapable, inexorable smell, and she turned away towards the paddock as if to shake off the thought. She turned into Robin, standing still as a tree, hung with an oversize shirt, her face stained with grief and exertion. And she turned into the faces of Johnny and Evy, four and five and still as ghosts, their gaping eyes drinking in the doings.

Ma collected Robin and walked over to the little ones. The rack stood starkly behind them, nothing left but a smoking skeleton – ladders framing a lattice of steeply angled harrows. She and Evy had picnicked in its pattern, when the rack was only partly full, and imagined a trellis overshading a veranda. But now it hulked and fumed and displayed its empty spikes like some medieval monster. She turned the children away, took one in each hand, and walked back up the hill while a shadow stayed, standing above them, a long streak in the bright sky.

It would be some time before Evy would understand Casey's "exile." For a long time she only understood that he'd found the princess sweater she'd left, had been badly burned, and had to be sent away.

Ten year old Mary Robin had been tutoring Patty in grammar and they'd missed the whole thing. This instructional blossoming came with Robin's blessing and Mary Robin carried her mother's authority. So no argument could be made for departing their study and the mildest complaint was met with a stalwart "Stet!",

referring to the proofreader's mark for "leave as before; correction made in error." At this point, Mary Robin was enamoured of a Miss Bateson and "stet" was Miss Bateson's favourite, a term she'd use in staccato to cut huge groaning farmboys down to acquiescent stumps. And as Robin trudged into the new place, the girls were still studiously seated, the walls still echoing, "Stet!"

The smell that haunted Ma was one she recalled from rendering pork but she drew on the memory from a jumble of scents. Even in the cool shelter of the big house, the choking swelter of the Karoo fell back on her. It was hauled into her senses by the almost-nutty smell of cordite and the pungent acid-on-steel smell of what they called "high explosives": scents that flashed up as real as words on a page and couldn't be huffed away.

She had been selected, quite surely, on the recommendation of Commissioner Herchmer. He was then Colonel Herchmer, as he had resigned his police commission to lead the Mounted Rifles in the South African conflict. She surprised herself at the silly pride she felt when she was outfitted in a service stetson – quite similar to those the men in the Mounted Police were just then acquiring around Depot. Needless to say, the blue serge dress and high boots were no less appealing. The crossing she had weathered well, despite the constant smell of vomit. She and two other nursing Sisters (a title that at the time held a pragmatic appeal for her) became friendly and socialized in spite of the conditions. It was February in the Atlantic and the ship had just been renamed *Laurentian* but it was first christened *The Polynesian* and the crew still called her "Rolling Poly." The seas are quite rough in February in the Atlantic.

It was summertime in Africa and they were soon regretting the dark serge and heavy boots. Despite inviting map names like Prince Albert Road and Beaufort West and Victoria West, the view from the open rail carriages consisted of blowing dirt and sage followed by blowing sage and dirt. The temperature was more than one hundred degrees every day. Florence, her partner (the two of them were assigned a field hospital unit) always found some little thing comical. One day they were informed the line ahead was all clear because settlements had been secured through to Victoria West, thanks to General Settle. Well, Flo had no end of fun describing General Settle booting settlers from the settlements. Of course, the settlers were referred to officially as rebels and Flo created quite a bluster. When things were dark, too, Flo found a reason to be gay. When they had served at Wonderfontein, Springfontein, and Bloemfontein, she admired their lovely names to Mary, and said they should have been Enteric Fever, Enteric Fever, and Enteric Fever. Mary had grown up with a Dutch father and, nursing for Dr. Zimmerman, she'd picked up some German, as well.

It was Victoria West that introduced them to service in a field hospital. Their first week of service, day three, was the one she remembered. They didn't just treat British in British field hospitals; there were occasionally Boers as well. This pair were in a boarded-off area, a bit like a pen, tacked on. The front was open. Staff could see in, over the screens, from most places in the main tent. A young man – they were all young men – with severe wounds complained to his compatriot of thirst and said he felt a wetness under him. She brought him water and dressed an open wound on his back. The two Boers – just farm boys – realized that she

spoke their language and became quite excited, though the one she had seen to was quite certainly dying and wouldn't need to talk much longer. But his name was De Wet – she remembered that. She didn't see him again until they brought the burned boy in. That was when the smell caught her attention, and it smelled as the hog had smelled when her father rendered. His hair was thick with the smell of cordite, likely from firing his Mauser. His chest and neck were spattered with evil smelling explosives powder and the rest of him was half baked away. They set him with the other Boers, and De Wet reached a hand out to her when she passed. There were their own boys to tend to; she hadn't fully completed a round when the last one came in; she didn't know every nursing Sister by name, let alone every surgeon; she had too, too much to learn; and here she was with a bunch of Boers. But she didn't leave quickly enough – she hesitated. De Wet fumbled at her side for her hand. She left to her rounds immediately. It was impossible to ignore the burned man (besides the smell). A wounded man or any person in trauma seems able to transport away if the pain is too great or the impact too frightening. But one without skin, it seems, is condemned to that body and they will suffer in torment right there until they are finished.

She had to attend him a minute, she could see he wriggled so. De Wet had fished a German Bible from somewhere (he was wearing only short trousers) and was panting from the exertion. He hoisted his arms up with a grunt and a sigh and implored her, by stabbing a finger into the page, to look. When she looked (it was Revelation 7), he said with tremendous effort, "Kümmernisse…Springfontein." Something about care, she guessed. The burned man rolled his eyes past and they

seemed to catch on the bible. He lay still a second and looked right into her face. He started rolling and nodding his head again and said softly, "Beten…Beten." It scared her and she left in a hurry. Her father, years ago, had said *bidden* – what Irene Papadopolous thought was "beaten"- in his own delirium.

"Bidden…bidden," he said, and then they sawed off his foot and clipped off his fingers. Pray…pray.

She changed an amputee's dressings and brought the tools back, on a tray, to a sterile basin. Then she went back to the Boers. De Wet was limp. His Bible was on the bloody bandage around his chest. The burned man's head was still rolling weakly and his eyes were wild and unseeing. The middle Boer, who hadn't spoken before, looked at her, looked to De Wet and said, "Bidden, Mooi, bidden." Pray, pretty, pray.

She would never have pictured herself doing such a thing, but she did it then, close to them, with all the stench of war and death rushing in.

The head nurse spoke up in a loud voice behind her to say, "One should have expected you might want to shout 'Hooray!'"

It was uncanny, Flo said. And she was affected by the uncannyness, only her first week there, if she thought back on it. Beten… bidden… beaten… : to give over the struggle to bet that a higher power, providence would provide intervention.

In two months they were at the Vet River, where both sides were caught in Coetzee's Drift. The fighting was barbarous and the wounded were just everywhere. They were

a full day and a full night cutting and sewing and sawing and cauterizing. Big

men were laid low; men of good stock were mewling and weeping. That morning they were exhausted, of course, and she and Flo were happy to hear that the rough-riders were coming. The rough-riders were the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles and it was always uplifting to see someone from home. Some of the Mounted Rifles she knew from their days with the Police. Even with her strong stomach, that morning, though, they almost made her sick. It may only have been the crimson sand or the dark red soil, but the rough-riders swaggered in, bragging of turning the Vet waters blood red. All night to their elbows, the *Vet* meaning fat, and their boasts of destruction made her feel she would vomit. It passed and she never again felt she might lose her stomach, but she had a changed view of the stock in their keeping.

Back to Hopetown – dust and sage, putrid water, and a rumour of looting. On to Bloemfontein – of all places, this is where Flo was stricken with dysentery. Enteric Fever wouldn't be far behind. She was too ill to transport by the time they were recalled to the Vet. At Parys and Pretoria no word came. Pretoria was filling with burned out farm people whose things were all gone. Still no word came. At least they were busy and didn't have time to think – there were more wounded and not so many ill. Travelling over the land on tacked-on rails, it had seemed that the land was equipped to gouge and stab with its language. It was all vees: it would give *Vaal* for a valley, but trade *Veldt* for a plain; it insisted on *Vlei* and *Vley*, marsh and meadow, and, always, *Vless*, meat. The hospital in Pretoria was a stationary, so she was sure to receive word. There was a doctor there who kept her in stitches, running out onto battlegrounds to treat injured and wounded

men. Sometimes a priest went with him, and that was crazier still.

Flo never did send word. She showed up at the hospital in Pretoria, but she was assigned to the field hospital that was set up beside the stationary. She wasn't gay anymore; she'd lost that somewhere and replaced it with folly. She always appeared fuddled at her work and it seemed there was always some chuckling young man who would help her.

She had seen her father do the same. He was the best fiddler in the county (and a terrible farmer – half the implements broken and the horses with bad shoulders from ill-fitting collars). He was witty and spirited and full of charisma. He would play the piano at the dances, if there was one, but he would rather be dancing, showing off his pretty wife. Then after they took three fingers from his left hand, he learned to fiddle with his left and finger with his right. He always left the fiddle playing to others after that, but if he was asked for a tune, he'd squawk away worse than he had to, laughing, because he had learned to be just good enough to be bad. The dancing was worse. He was too proud to quit going. Once there, he thought he should always explain. "I've got two left feet," he'd say. "Da doc told me I got one left foot and one foot left," and then he'd hump around the floor, clomping his stump, and there'd always be some polite laughter. And there'd be some quiet, tactless chuckles.

When the real fighting was done and the pillaging was bearable and there were only those to be invalided left at the hospital, most of the nursing sisters – including Flo – were sent south. Florence had been there more than two months and they hadn't spoken or just lingered more than five minutes at once. They

waved long and heartily when she left.

In two days, Mary was to leave. The next morning, someone dropped a twelve-pounder on the empty field hospital and three people were hurt. Two of them were Canadians, hit by boulders blasted out of the protective wall had been erected around the temporary hospital. All three were to be moved to the port at Lourenco Marques, on the east coast. The British sergeant had a shrapnel wound to the head, and some metal still there. The Canadian corporal had had his lower spine crushed and could only be immobilized for the time being. The Canadian Lieutenant had a flail chest and his ribs were badly broken. The doctor had removed his spleen and done a marvellous job trying to knit the ribs back together, but a lacerated liver was another thing. With three more to move, they'd need at least another nurse. Lieutenant Moore was a family friend of Dr. Fiset and the doctor begged Mary to stay. She did so because she felt she owed him something for entertaining her, when she arrived, with his crazy antics. "Dat boy won' see again 'is 'ome, 'e don' come now wit' me, wit' us," Fiset said. He was to become "her" lieutenant.

The *Orcana*, a hospital ship, was to carry those to be invalided to England from the coast. It was to put in at Cape Town before starting for England and, they had agreed, she could join her contingent steaming from there. She had agreed, but she knew that they would miss her boat. Flo would travel on the Central Railroad. It would be two days to De Aar and two days to Cape Town. Mary would take the Delagoa line on a hospital train - only three hundred versus a thousand miles, but a very slow train and a bad line. Then they would have to sail

to Cape Town.

The hospital train was separated into two sections. The one in front was for men and at the back – farther from the ash – were the officers. The officers had two cars. There were four of them. The nearly one hundred and sixty men were carried in fourteen cars. Mary moved between them, tending to the officers and the last car of men. There were supply cars, nursing service stations, mess cars and the like – in all there had to be twenty five or more. Every third car was painted white with a red cross. The snipers shot anyway and she heard the zip of a bullet passing through before noon on the first day. You never saw the sniper. Once, as she stepped from one car to the next, she heard the smack of a bullet on the siding. She looked out but saw nothing but a native, standing as still as a sign post and staring quizzically as they zipped past.

The train travelled at such speed. Did they think to outrun the sniper's bullet? The Mausers were just as effective then when they missed a window or port but sounded menacing or withering.

The British sergeant they lost the first day, rolling and flopping in the wooden liner of his berth. The line was very rough. Dr. Fiset had the sergeant and the Canadian corporal in the last car of the men's quarters and the young lieutenant in the first of the officer's carriages. Mary's run. Besides the sergeant, the exiting troupe lost eleven others the first day – four to wounds and seven to enteric fever. One shot the next morning. All of them interred that afternoon at Belfast. Again they fed the hungry earth its lumps of fat, its pounds of flesh.

The Rifles were there. They were now the 1st Canadian Mounted Rifles because

the 1st CMR were now the Dragoons. They looked like rough riders. Some were still sooty from the morning's business, assigned to a farm-burning campaign. Rebel-rousting. They assisted the Royal Irish, some Highland outfit, and a ragtag group of Uitlanders from OFS – the Orange Free State. Foreigners – a cultural infection – the Boers called the Uitlanders. The Uitlanders still claimed OFS, though officially it had been deemed the Orange River Colony – ORC. Orange Free State… Orange River… bitter orange - it brought to mind Mary's pretty French mother, explaining the bitter orange, the essence – the stuff of her Eau de Cologne, a precious dab for her daughter, all the way from France. It was gone in a second. Another scent grabbed her attention.

It was a distant thread of black smoke. Evidence of a morning's work, where the village of Witpoort had once been. It trickled up behind the Rifles, some of them wobbling at attention; the Royal Irish and the Highlanders played the pipes. Quite a ceremony. An early start to their send-off, since they were pressing on to Pretoria. (Near the tracks, standing still, a few Bantus watched.) Some of them were already stupored. Some just hung their heads. Far from the disciplined ranks she had first seen at the Cape. A long ways even from the bragging commandos at the Vet. She could not possibly have caught the smell in the smoke, miles and miles away. Or in the homeless settlers trudging in and milling around the north end of the town. It gripped her, though. She stood in fresh air. She had stepped off a caravan of rank pustules, infection and infestations, rice-water stool, and bloody vomit. Still the spoor gripped her.

The man shot was one in her care. An Australian captain. Not so badly wounded

really – the right leg gone below the knee. He suffered what was then called hysteria – a complex claustrophobia. He refused his medicine; he could even sniff it out in his food. He was convinced it would make him rot. The same thing with the still and the dark. Rotten.

They stopped at night (the tracks were susceptible to sabotage). They turned down the lamps. In the stationary hospital there was always a nursing sister moving somewhere; there was a lamp at each corner of the open ward. Mary stayed with him that night, really more for the sake of the others. When he calmed down – talked it out – she left the lamp, turned down for the sake of the lieutenant, but she refused to uncover the port windows.

What haunted him was an experience months before. A pretty innocent doing, in the midst of a war.

His company was waging a drawn-out engagement with the Boer. They chased – or rather followed – them across the Veldt and into the high country north of Bloemfontein. In the high country they could easily be trapped or pinned down. They had been battling snipers all along. Before heading into the hills, they killed what game they could and gathered wagonloads of fruit. They were soon mired with the Boer. They started jerking the meat and uncovering the fruit to allow some to ripen. The meat would keep through the frosty nights if they could get it jerked in the day. If any of the fruit caught a frost, it would spoil - in one day. He told her of how his father had had them take a tub of water from the house to leave in the vegetable bin on frosty nights. The cooling water warmed everything else. For four nights in those hills, he had his men throw a canvas over

each fruit wagon and drag a fresh corpse – preferably Boer – underneath. They held on to overcome the Boer at his old game and complete their offensive. He was awarded the rank of captain.

The next morning the captain insisted on sitting at an open window. He watched the Vley zip by. He was shot in the head.

The Rifles were gone early after the grand farewell. There were none to be found when the rest wakened. Yesterday, Mary had commandeered a couple of disconsolate farm boys from their ranks. After the interment, she had them repair a car on the train. The one she had just scrubbed down. They removed the wooden liners from the berth pans. They folded the iron pans up to cover the windows (to about six inches from the top). Then they hung two liners from rifle straps they attached to the ceiling. When the train clanked away from Belfast that morning, the first officer's car carried Mary's corporal and her lieutenant. They rode airily in hammocks, protected from jostle and sway.

Mary was mildly surprised but pleased with the effort. The train pulled out to the east at the same time as the Uitlanders. The Uitlanders of ORC and the exodus to *Orcana*. She watched their column winding away. She felt the train wind and sway. Venus ORCus, she thought, and venus orcus. Navis Orcus on the bay. They were at Lourenco Marques on Delagoa Bay in one day. They had lost five men and no officers. Two to wounds, three to fever. Another fill of Vless. (Pacify. Ossify.)

The *Orcana* was surprisingly comfortable and well equipped. They were berthed through the night and under way at dawn. A British mate of about average size

but with a voice like a foghorn called out: "'Board 'e Orr-cannaar!... 'Board 'e Orr-cannaar!... 'Board 'e Orr-cannaar!" The gangways were already on deck. They were off.

Mary shared an outside cabin with a British nurse. Olive was a bit older. She carried what seemed to be a permanent strain in her face. If you didn't look, she was always cheery and bright. The English flavour in her speech – that could be condescending and mean – Mary noticed was almost pretty. It could have been called sweet. Olive had trained in New York. The Sisters at the Depot hospital had all trained in New York or Montreal. Olive knew a number of them and she and Mary struck it off right away. In fact, Mary's Latin dictionary had once belonged to Olive's Clinics partner - Sister Fay. It was hard to forget Fay – a fairy dancing around inside a serene habit. The dictionary was Mary's only departure gift. Fay was Olive's first real intravenous injection, after practicing religiously on oranges for weeks. They were interrupted by Fiset with orders for care and written prescriptions. Their charges were across the hall in inside cabins. He suggested that they work together whenever they could – better for lifting, and handling generally , if seas were rough. They had not yet left the bay.

The seas were calm and the men were in good spirits. The women, too – including two nurses with Enteric. Mary had even shared a laugh. With her lieutenant. She still considered Corporal McDonnel and Lieutenant Moore her corporal, her lieutenant. They were in separate cabins, on either side of a passage that led directly to the outside deck. Neither man was to be moved. On day three, Mary considered the glassy sea, the rocky ride on the Delagoa Line, and

convinced Olive to help her relocate the men. They could not be sat. They could not be bent or put in chairs. Mary and Olive unfastened the beds and carried them – with the corporal and the lieutenant (and a few others) in them – out to the deck with the others. She was beginning to surprise herself. The sun was warm and bright. The sea shone. The light bounced off the white metal deck and rails in brilliant arrays. She laughed (as they all did) with the lieutenant when he mimicked the mate and his "Orr-cannaar!" His face was slightly jaundiced but looked quite healthy in the sun. "I think that I should call her the Canard d'or," he said, "the golden duck."

Their efforts were noticed and noted. The head nurse was notified. (They no longer heard from Fiset.) They were reprimanded and warned that it would not happen again. It didn't matter. The weather came up. The duck tossed and rocked in rough seas.

Mary found herself pleased to see the angry ocean. She queried herself. Simple duties were much harder. Some were impossible. Men suffered. She had no answer. She saw Fiset again – the four surgeons had been working furiously, "making hay while de sonn shine." Her charges were well – no losses – his "boys" among them. Dr. Fiset always stopped to see Moore, and often McDonnel. The sad-eyed lieutenant always took a stab at sounding chipper, even when he fought through drugs that fogged his brain. He could smile at his thick tongue when he wasn't in pain. Clear-headed, he regained his wit. The cheer he struggled to maintain. The corporal had his great moustaches. He waxed them and twirled them. He spoke loudly in bold dashes. There was a dull slice in his

eyes, though, that men get when they lose command of their manhood.

They lost a full day to the heavy seas and faced more bad weather. Mary resigned herself to missing her contingent at the Cape. It seemed a relief. A bit puzzling as they wrestled with their duties on the heaving ship. A voyage to England aboard the *Orcana* with Olive might not be bad.

They did not see calm water again until they were in sight of Table Bay, at Cape Town. They had lost nearly another day. *Orcana* glided into the bay. Mary and Olive watched the tugs squirming up around them from the rail. Men in wheeled chairs and nurses were scattered all over the middle segment of the deck. Fiset stood with another surgeon. He squinted at the ships berthed in the harbour.

Mary's heart sank. They were thirty minutes in harbour and she learned her contingent was yet to leave. It occurred to her, finally, that she didn't care to go home. The ship was one of those that would come to be called liners. It was new and had all the luxuries. It had been specially commissioned in thanks to the Canadian volunteer contingents. It had been christened the *Roslin Castle*. Now it was held up, waiting for the Rifles and Dragoons.

The Rifles had spent an extra day revelling in Pretoria. They did the same, carousing at Johannesburg. They came upon a rail break and skirmished at Kroonstad. They collected the Dragoons and brawled at Bloemfontein; saw a skirmish entering the Karoo and another line break near De Aar.

News of their partying preceded them. They were stopped short of the city and ordered to camp north of Cape Town. The next day, yesterday, they met an Aussie regiment there. The Aussies had been ordered to do the same. They

promptly joined up and marched into town. When they got there, they found that the bars had been ordered not to sell them liquor. They decided not to buy at all and kicked off the Cape Town Riot, as it came to be known, taking and leaving as they pleased.

The trials were short. Mainly they were not trials at all. The soldiers had already paid well for goods and damages. It was really just a matter of recording their payment. The day after the *Orcana's* arrival the trials were over. It was also the day they paid the stony soil: four men, no officers: two of wounds, two fever. The next day the high spirited Canadian heroes completed the ranks sent off on the *Roslin Castle.*

Even with eight hundred men aboard the Castle was roomy. Dr. Fiset had set to appropriating space as soon as they had arrived. He found an appropriate space in a remaining executive cabin. The Rifles and Dragoons were still in the city. He had the doors painted – the cabin was two, really, with a sliding partition between and a door for each one. They were painted white with large red crosses emblazoned "Blesse."

"Wounded," Fiset told Mary, "Only de two, bot' our boy, and a cabine of all your own." He waved his hand through the middle of the big cabin. He lowered his voice. Looking to the partition spread nearly across the room, he said, "Don't eider of dose boy t'ink 'e can see 'is 'ome again, dey come to England wit' me." The corporal – looking straight up – was carried into the far room. "If dey can get close, if dey can t'ink dey just might make it, dey will make enough fight to get dere. First only if dey can make it half de way." A jaundiced-looking Lieutenant

Moore was carried in. "Dat one…," Fiset started, "if dat one 'ad just a little more liver… You know, Mary, in Europe dere is already a man, a Doctor Landsteiner I t'ink is 'is name, who says 'e 'as figure de code and 'e can transfuse blood, dat 'e is right now transfusing blood. If you can get dat boy to 'ome, may be some one will make a chance for dat liver, so it can catch up." He handed her a leaf of prescription preparations. (Of course, she thought, stony ground – of course it would be. Landsteiner.) "Dis boat…dis ship 'as a wireless telegraph. You can get dem half way to 'ome, dey can pretty soon send de telegram after dat." He turned to go. "Remember de corporal, 'e is not to be moved. De lieutenant is not to be jarred or jostled in any way. Take care dat de lieutenant is not run down for de sake of a sunny deck some day." He gestured out the door, to the hubub, and whisked himself away. Below he called, "Take care le blesse. A vos souhaits," waving, and was gone.

The Rifles and Dragoons continued to board. There were hearty shouts and jangling spurs and every sort of souvenir. Medals and hats and skins and paintings and blue china plates. As well as parrots and monkeys and two nearly tame baboons. One sergeant – to several cheers – carried an Australian regimental good luck charm: a bird of paradise.

Within the hour the Dr. Fiset and Olive and the *Orcana* were gone.

Within thirty minutes a squad of orderlies appeared at her cabin. They delivered several jars of pharmaceuticals in a storm-proof rack, burners, a centrifuge wheel, beakers, test tubes and scales, crucibles, measuring spoons and a mortar and pestle. Mary's airy cabin was now little more than a bin.

Early that afternoon the *Roslin Castle* sailed. The Rifles returned the Aussie bird – at the last minute. (Not to New Guinea, of course. To the troops in the crowd on the dock.) So late, in fact, that the sergeant had to be rescued to the ship.

Mary waved from the upper deck. She spotted Flo on the deck below. She waved to her in huge looping arcs. They had been here for more than a year. They had both survived. Of course, everyone thought she was waving to some beau in the crowd below. Flo looked up once when Mary called in the din, but stared past her. She tipped her head and pinched her nose. She held a handkerchief to her nostril. She stood like that a few minutes at the heavy polished rail. She was glassy-eyed when she turned around and wandered away.

The ship soon settled in. A belligerent baboon was thrown overboard. There were no immediate campaigns to be waged. Dances failed. There were eight hundred men and nine nurses on board. Even the singing waned and strangled off. By the time they got to the equator, there was almost no-one at the crossing party.

Mary had some time and a quiet space. She thought of her first circuit assisting doc Zimmerman. Nursing her father through to the Depot clinic. Then four days on the prairie, through Thunder Creek and back. A quick learner. Her heart was in it. Four more days while her sisters stayed at the neighbours.

Zimmerman arranging her stay, her pay, her training at the clinic. Her sisters in the house with the woman. Mother. There would be no more eau de cologne, no new 'noli meum', that was for sure… you would think.

Now this.

Fiset's boys were not well. Her corporal was experiencing a creeping paralysis. He had just now discovered it. Her lieutenant was slowly losing his battle with haemorrhage. He was more jaundiced; his ribs were not healing.

Every day she mixed and administered Fiset's prescriptions. She did not need much of the equipment. The rack. The mortar and pestle. She supposed that the look of a laboratory was intended to be reassuring. Like the cases in Zimmerman's wagon marked 'Ministrations' in big block print, she thought. Zimmerman had a good heart. He could be counted upon to arrive. He would get through. A wonderful surgeon. Not particularly gifted, but who could innovate; he could perform in the most inhospitable conditions. He stayed, too, until his job was done completely. He knew who paid his bills, though - who could be expected to support the rest of his practice. The ministration was called Parascelus Medicament. He prescribed its constituents and had it prepared right in front of the brass. They made it in Ontario, where they had a Pharmaceuticals Act. They shipped it west in cases marked: MINISTRATION: PARASCELUS MEDICAMENT. Cases that were stacked up in the Dominion Hospital – the Depot clinic. Doc took two with him every week. No matter where calls or his circuits took him, he managed to pass through Thunder Creek. When he got there, they appeared like the phantoms that had frightened the ladies' mission group. Doc's cough remedy. They lined up for it, tatters waving in a savage winter wind. Half starved, most of them. Coughing, some with pneumonia. Glad to have it. A three-and-a –half ounce elixir bottle. "Poor devils," doc would say. After about the third time assisting - travelling a circuit with doc Zimmerman -

he told her. "Laudanum," he said, "tincture of opium, just laudin' 'em all, poor devils."

She prepared real cough medicine. Dover's powder – opium and ipecac – in a tart solution. The ipecac to loosen the chest. It would keep them coughing, keep the lungs of the sedentary from filling.

She was growing fond of them, she thought. Fond of them. Her corporal and her lieutenant. McDonnel was still sullen after his discovery. He was always uncomfortable when she bathed him. He always looked up away when she washed down the numb nether regions. That day she drew his attention. She backed away a step with a start. She was wiping down his thighs when his penis jumped and squirted piss across her apron and his bed before emptying over his leg, onto the sheets, onto the floor. He was too embarrassed to speak while she cleaned up. Until now he had at least held control of his bladder. She rousted Moore from behind his screen. He made jokes until the corporal heaved a laboured laugh and the tears ran from the corners of his open eyes and fell down to the back of his head.

She had asked them, "What will you do when you're home; what would you do if you were home right now?" McDonnel had no more quips - about fighting the hopeless French, about wooing hapless, gullible prairie maids, or any quips at all. Moore tried, but when he teased, Arthur – McDonnel – just turned his head away, as best he was able.

Arthur listened while Vincent – her lieutenant – fetched his little brother and caught fat perch in the river or rode to the quarry with Yank – his blood brother –

and made swashbuckling stories from the bones in the earth. Mary had come to admire his speech, even through slightly clenched teeth. (He had been refusing his medicine.) Admire the evenly measured meter and the sharply clipped edges of words. Clicked like a precision instrument. It matched the fine cut of his features, she thought, and the lively green of his eyes.

They began to fade a little each day. No, she thought.

She was really quite fond of him now.

She chanced to shorten the turnbuckles at the foot of Arthur's bed one day. It was all the adjustment she could find. It was meant to bring it level. The box around his hips wouldn't let him go anywhere and he was angled to see out the window. That same day she found Flo. Flo was never home when Mary had time to dart down to her cabin. She just happened by. There was a glaze on her eye. Her speech was slurred. She had tea with Mary but she took quite a shine to Arthur. Arthur brightened. Vincent waned. Mary stiffened.

Vincent was soon nearly too weak to protest or to carry out his own bathing. Just out of St. Vincent, where they would put into port, Mary bathed Arthur, who still looked to the ceiling, but looked forward to preening for Flo. She was gently rinsing his genitals when she turned to see that Vince had not drawn his screen. He watched her sure hands. He held her eye a moment. Slack-faced, he dropped deep hooded eyes to the floor and slipped the screen up along his bed.

The ship seemed to revive at St. Vincent. Most of the men went ashore and returned that evening to a party in the atrium. They were loud but not boisterous. To mark the occasion, they helped Flo unhook Arthur and move him through the

door to the rail above the party. Flo propped his shoulders and braced his hips and generally dithered around. Mary rolled Vince out the other door. The music was pleasant and melodic. Voices rumbled, glasses tinkled. A man laughed loudly. "What would you be doing if you were at home and these were your people?" He raised a palm a bit and made a claw with his fingers. Turning his knit brows toward her face, he looked at her keenly and gestured as if to speak. Relaxing, he smiled and returned his gaze to the party. He asked her to wheel him in early. Flo and Art stayed late.

She fastened down the wheels of his bed. He was yellowing, yes, she saw that. His eyes were darker, his cheeks hollowing. She thought to grab her mortar and pestle and insist he take his medication. (mortar and pestle, mortar and pistol) She realized that she was staring. "You were going to say… earlier…" (mortar and pistol, mortal and pester)

"I was going to say earlier…," he said tiredly. A sad fervour seized his eyes, his face. "About my people," he said. "I was going to say that I can fish and ride, swim the river and sing to the moon. I can do these things. These things I have done and carry them with me. You know that I am losing quickly now this fight with my own blood. I will not see my people again. I will not know them as they are; still I have them with me as they have been. And the hard work of imagination will give me their sense once again.

"But, I shall die not ever… knowing…" He turned his face away to the port. "I die having never known… without the knowledge of a woman."

(mortal and pester…heckle and jibe)

The next evening – their last in port - saw the same time and place but with a local entertainment and a more spirited celebration. Flo was positively dizzy and Arthur's moustaches were twirled to outstanding points. You would think that their little piece of the inside deck was a private theatre box.

Vincent was weaker and wanted to stay a minute to sleep. Until the party really got started.

At about eleven, Mary closed the doors so that the room remained dim. It was lighted only with two silvery beams. They shone through the ports facing the bay and the big disc of moon. She gathered her sponges and cloths and towels, poured a small tub of warm water. He wakened as she lowered his bed. She unfastened the buttons along the shoulder of her serge dress. She slipped out and let it fall. Her slip made contact only at the thin straps on her shoulders and the sharp points at the tips of her breasts. It slid off like water. "It's time you were bathed," she said, and began to sponge him down. She carefully cleaned along the irregular ripples of rib. She carefully cleaned the surgery scar and his discoloured abdomen. Then she washed the still wide, square shoulders as he unclenched his teeth, down his back and started up from his feet.

If he had not had trouble breathing before, he fairly gulped air now. He stilled himself with a little grunt. He trembled as she ran the warm sponge and cloth back and forth and up and down on his genitalia. He was not long stripping what little underwear she had left from her. The bending seemed almost painless. She dropped the sides and lifted a leg across the bed. She shuffled up the bed, her feet wide, hands on her hips and lowered herself, tentatively, on him. He pressed hard

into her while she strained and straightened. Both necks stretched while he made claim to entry and she was able, slowly, to grant him. There was a faint pop low at his ribs. One more slow strained stroke (and a pop, grinding) and he set into a rhythm. She could feel the grating, up above the heavy plate where he held her, gyrating. He pulled her down, bone ends gnashed, and the old incision bled. She wanted to press her hands to his chest. She couldn't bring herself to, and leaned them back on his legs. She arched her back, causing the contour of her rib cage to appear, sliding up under skin the texture of lily petals. The cage outline drew an inverted V and pointed up between her breasts to another formed of her jaw line and chin on the stem of her neck. Just over her chin, her nostrils flared on the septum, below the peak of her nose. Lithe, he thought, an effortless grace in the supple flex; lithe as fluid, lithe as a ripple on the Lethe. He bucked and pulled his mouth low in a grimace, sucking air through his teeth.

When it was over, his eyes were rolled to the top lid and he remained frozen. She lifted slowly and carefully stepped off. His abdomen clicked. He looked to her, mouth agape and smiled. He coughed and squeezed his elbows to his sides, groaning. She dressed and prepared a solution of Dover's powder. (Not so lily-white, less than (<) lily-white, in spite of the image at the Depot hospital.) He was asleep when she returned.

They steamed out of port, almost quietly, in the morning. In three or four days, they would be close enough to the American mainland to use the wireless telegraph. Arthur preened and composed a message. Vince coughed and weakened and grew more jaundiced. The second day out saw him taking

medication. The ship's doctor – recovered from hospital in St. Vincent – said they should keep him covered. On day three, he was almost unable to swallow his medication. Mary prompted him to compose a telegram. They chose the words carefully, for brevity, and to glean a response. On day four they lined up to send their telegrams. They were able to send that morning. Flo and Arthur first, then Mary to Depot and Vince to Terrebonne. Vince scared them that afternoon. When he wasn't mouthing pretty words to Mary through the opium fog (la bluette…de ma bluette…), he was wheezing or gurgling, somehow making noise. Then he just stopped. Stopped for twenty or thirty seconds and came coughing, choking and sputtering back. She willed him a fighter. She found herself angered at the thought of capitulation. Fierce in the fear of the suggestion that he might die of liver failure, might succumb to some sluggish indifference, some lethargy. Day five was not so lucky. In early morning, some life. "Le sang lui est monte… au… au… la belle … la bete … le bled…." At mid morning, with the wind moaning through the cover on the port, Vincent choked and died of pneumonia right in front of them, in the middle of the beautiful, roomy cabin aboard the *Roslin Castle.*

In six days they were in Halifax. In thirteen Mary was home. And in four weeks she and Joseph were married in the Depot chapel.

The Kelly boys noticed that a mention of Evelyn always alerted Sam. He had been taking fencing and painting jobs at the Kelly place whenever they came up,

though he was long gone from the Industrial School. So he was bargain-priced labour and they weren't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, as they said, but they weren't above playing him with casual mention of their sister. They called him their playboy – as if she'd even so much as look his way when she had all those handsome University lads mooning over her. But they took the time to introduce him to their equine stock. Not much left for heavies. Today's market was in pleasure stock. They acquainted him with their fine apaloosas. They showed him, too, why they weren't entirely done with heavies. Perhaps they couldn't imagine him a threat, but they took the time to explain their breeding strategy - how they used the Percherons to beef up the strains they were weaving into a rodeo stock. Patrick's bulls, too, were gaining repute as bucking stock at local fairs and rodeos and word spread to cowboy associations. Sam's tutoring included the cattle as well and he was soon horsing around on steers - saddle broncs and bulls to follow shortly. The Kelly boys had a gleeful time setting him on progressively wilder rides. But it wasn't like the malicious ordering and mean-spirited tricks at school. There everyone had a mentor for the first two years of their industrial instruction. The mentor tormented his apprentice with gusto, competing with his fellow mentors, until the apprentice was ready to have his turn, wielding the spite on another, for the remaining two years of his education. The Kelly boys always had a challenge for him that was usually just beyond his capabilities, but the boys rode too and they never wanted to see him really hurt. He would see Evelyn around, though rarely, in the summer when she was home from school in the city. She often noticed him but seldom smiled. He always

stiffened and shuffled and never thought of her down by the river flats until long after she was gone. She talked to him a couple of times during the second summer. One day he was loading hay onto the lift that would carry it up to the loft. He was leaning back under a particularly chock-full forkfull when he chanced to see her standing a few feet to his right. "Is Bobby paying you a full day's wages for this, this kind of effort?" she asked right into his face. He felt his face colour, first from a shot of panic, and then from a flattery in discovering that he recognised that she was teasing him. Still he worked a little faster. He was thankful for the work, a vehicle for his anxiety and this, too spurred him to greater speed. Behind them a hayfield began at the edge of the valley and ran down the ridge to the lush bottom land. The heavy moist odour drifted back up. "When I was little, I asked Jo-pa why horses would go over the fence or through the fence when they had lots of hay every day, right in the barn or paddock." Sam carried on forking hay

but he could hardly believe that she was staying right there, talking to him. "Jo-pa said it was the fresh hay. He said it was like the thought of brussel sprouts at a boil, the smell of the steam. They're summer things and you should imagine them with sweet baby peas and solid adolescent potatoes and cream sauce. That's how the hay smelled and that's how the horses thought of it." Sam had never had a brussel sprout and he didn't think that he'd ever eaten cream sauce. It all just added to her exotic image. He heaved more hay. "In the summer they get a little bit of green hay. But in the winter it's the dry old hay in the loft and they're glad of it; they need lots of it in the cold. Jo-pa only let them have a little fresh hay

and then some from the drying rack. Otherwise they might bloat, of course. They're domestic animals now. They're not used to being able to eat their fill in the succulent grass; they'd mostly just make themselves sick. You've got to dry anyway, so it doesn't flare when you put it up in the barn, and Jo-pa said it was better for 'em if the prairie's breath – the wild wind - passed over it, tamed it for easy eating and putting away."

That fall Sam had the dream that he knew had readied him for next summer's sun dance – his thirst dance - the one that would fuel his vision quest: He had been dispatched – sent off – by a family member – perhaps *omosoma* – or by his woman's people (he had a woman) to "cabin-watch" in the bush. Who needed to watch a cabin, especially in the bush? He was awakened in the night, in a large room with walls of heavy wood, by an intense purple beam flashing through a very small window, the only window in this sleeping room. Someone – his woman – claimed the beam was red. The light was actually clicking as it flickered and he thought, "like a northern light," as if that was something he knew. His woman jumped up out of bed to rectify and investigate – find it and fix it. His partner returned immediately, the light was gone, and the sleeping room went almost pitch. As his partner was climbing into bed, under a fur-like comforter, he could feel something, as if there was a weighty object on the outside as well, a clandestine accompanist – someone else, hidden, like a partner to his partner, pressing. He felt for the alien object – found it furry, firm and alive and clamping, pressing heavily on his previously probing hand. A spike, then almost needle-like teeth protruded through his fingers, his hand, while a paralysing

pressure of closing jaws continued to increase – he was caught under something very big, heavy, very strong, very overpowering. His woman was initially oblivious – didn't notice – but now motionless – terrified or unconcerned – scared, not worried?

Sam had dreams, many dreams, but that dream he carried with him to the old sundance site the following summer. He set himself in an elm tree after a day without water and nestled in to wait. Two warblers worked tirelessly, not thirty feet away, bringing a steady feed to two fat, ravenous cowbird chicks who filled the little nest. A few gophers tumbled in the short grass at the edge of the long grasses that marked the river flats. They were just bounding motion in the short grass but stood out conspicuously on the dark mounds at the mouths of their holes. Sam, too, was less than inconspicuous. He wore a light- coloured straw hat, a blue western shirt, new dungarees and black boots with riding heels. He had money in his pocket from his last stop on the circuit – the Western Professional Cowboy Association circuit – but he was determined to stay, pressing himself until he could conjure something like the hunter's "sight of necessity." It was a vision that allowed a hungry hunter with a hungry family and no game to suddenly begin to make out the phantom forms from against the trees, the bush, the grasses, the shadows, the gloom when the light was almost gone.

Evelyn always imagined herself as free and unencumbered as the uncles. She saw herself in Kennedy's easy grace, his ability to slip the unnecessary and calmly avert danger – courage in profile, she called it – but without his patience. She saw

herself in Seamus's head-on, headstrong, boldness, but without the disgrace. Seamus had followed Kennedy into the Air Force and found himself a position as quartermaster while his brother trained as a bombardier. The Sixers, as they were known – the No. 6 (RCAF) Bomber Group of RAF Bomber Command – were engaged in the ongoing strategic effort to maintain low-level, night time bombing missions. The missions were extremely dangerous and losses were high. One especially perilous mission saw only one of six crews return. But there should have been seven bombers on that run. Kennedy's plane had no fuel - and couldn't get any fuel. The ground tanks were empty and had to await refilling by truck. The fuel was simply gone. There was a lucrative black market in anything rationed, but Seamus had to know there'd be hell to pay in any case. He just met the charges head on and didn't explain, flinch, or otherwise give an inch.

Evelyn had seen her brothers chase away her school friends – mostly boy friends – for the last time. It was her final summer home before she would finish Teacher's College, as they called it, and they had managed to scare, embarrass, disgust, and exasperate every comer. Not that she would more than lead the sorry lot of them around, anyway, but that was for her to say and she hadn't had five free engagements all summer. With anyone. But she had an English saddle, a western saddle, gloves and spurs and parasols and umbrellas and lariats. She saddled up Scooter and stormed off down the valley. When they arrived at the flats, Scooter was slick with sweat, tossing, and blowing bits of foam. She left him bridled but allowed the reins to fall. It was a cinch that she wouldn't be packing on the mud this time. If he wasn't already apparent enough, the young

cowboy stirred in the tree. Evelyn dropped the Stetson and shook out her hair. She placed her hands on her hips. "Sammy," she barked, "C'mere."

Ralph came galloping up with his eyes big and wild and his tongue hanging out and immediately scattered a handful of gophers before pulling up set at the edge of the meadow. A ring-necked pheasant darted from under a low bush. Ralph lunged and caught it full in his mouth before it could clear the lowest line of leaves.

Evelyn and Scooter were back, uneventfully, before supper that afternoon and Evelyn let Trent comb him out. Because sometimes a horse is just a horse.

The first manifestation followed Shirley's apprehensive declaration in Sunday school. Shirley was rotten and, though the words tumbled out, there was a perceptible tremor in her certain posture, a flinch in her confidence. This was the girl who was often first to sport a new cuss word or obscene gesture. This was the girl who would stand beside her father and shine that gesture full in your view - and in his too, should he chance to look. And this was the girl who was spilling out a prayer request at the teacher's standard weekly invitation: Shirley had lost Scamp.

Scamp was a misnomer. Against her parent's careful suggestions, Shirley had insisted on naming her puppy after the protagonist of a recently-admired book. Scamp was now a twenty-three inch, sixty pound German Shepherd bitch. And Scamp had been missing for almost two days.

So Linda, who had suddenly become Miss Bauman upon taking on the class, included safe-keeping for Scamp with wisdom for government, protection for missionaries and weather for the harvest. Every head was bowed (almost) - and all the girls had closed their eyes - while Miss Bauman articulated. The boys squirmed in their varnished three-quarter-size chairs and crept their eyes across the varnished hardwood to the row of saddle shoes and bobby socks, then drew them back and lifted slowly to see if anyone else was looking. A big boy stared dully out the window behind the teacher with his best attempt at passive defiance. The rest peered across at the girls and up at the varnished pine cupboards flanked by glossy illustrations of Bible stories. These scenes acquired new fascination. Goliath was glorious in his Roman-style armour and even his fated Philistine countenance carried a terrible attraction; the supple ripple of muscle in the great lions surrounding Daniel found kinship in the metal contours of the giant's breastplate.

But Kenny was intent upon the image of Joseph, stripped of his many-coloured coat, being sold to slavers by his brothers. The resemblance between a picture of Jesus and Peter O'Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia* popped into his attention. Kenny's mother took him to movies in Assiniboia. This was a point of some curiosity for most of us whose parents equated movie theatres with dance halls and that enigmatic sinkhole of iniquity which would certainly someday disgorge its captives into a beer parlour.

Kenny was my age, younger than the rest and almost two years younger than the defiant one. It therefore fell to us to perform some service which would justify

our inclusion. Kenny's distraction left me holding the ball - or should I say the pencil - and I scanned with intent the sober semi-circle of boys. We still held the pencils we had used on our lessons to connect *Zacchaeus climbed a tree* with *He wanted to see Jesus* and *Zacchaeus was a rich publican* with *He cheated the people when he collected taxes.* (Kenny had drawn a line from *Zacchaeus was a rich publican* to *He came to seek and to save that which was lost* and from *Zacchaeus climbed a tree* to *He went to visit a sinner's house.*) I was sitting beside and slightly behind Connie where the semi-circle of boys met the semi-circle of girls and considered slipping my pencil through one of the lacy holes in the hem of her dress and into the open tube of the chair frame. She sat with her feet hooked around the chair legs, her eyes closed, her face earnest, and her hands clasped properly at her chest. In a moment of inspiration, and about the time that Miss Bauman was getting around to a supplication for Scamp, I reached forward and wormed my pencil through one of those lacy holes in a convenient fold. As I inched the hem upwards, hoisting warily more with will than motion, I looked eagerly across at my crescent of comrades. One sat with his shoulders hunched, his arms straight and stiff, his hands clamped to the seat of his chair and staring down at his oxfords as they swung alternately through a shaft of sunlight. Another pinched the eraser end of his pencil so that it stood erect, rocket-style, on his knee. Kenny was lost in a dream under a faint frown. Next to him was a kid who had his eyes squeezed shut, and Vance, whose bowtie hung unclipped on one side, and who examined, at eye level, what he'd just dug out of his nose. None

took notice – 'til at a hem elevation of about four inches, the big defiant one spun to the edge of his chair and snapped to like a bird dog.

It may have been the sudden movement but, in any case, I had failed to check the other side of the house, and right next to Miss Bauman sat an alerted Barbara, feigning revulsion with her nose wrinkled up and her lip curled back. I could see that she was about to make that derisive noise - that went with the look - by sucking loudly through her teeth. I darted a glance back at the protesting one. But it was too late. I froze half way there, for an instant, in the bright glare of Linda Bauman's sight - and the pencil clattered to the floor. Miss Bauman stopped in mid-sentence. Eyes brightened and heads lifted as others recognized the irregularity, then hooded and bowed almost imperceptibly as they noted the fixed and fierce gaze and curiosity sharpened with anticipation of a punitive highlight. Miss Bauman continued and concluded quickly. We were dismissed. I was attempting to leave with the rest, walking rigid as a stick, as if not swinging my arms or moving my head might make me less visible.

"David, stay behind, please," she said evenly. When the others had clamoured and swished out of the room and stomped and shuffled down the hall, Miss Bauman gathered up her Bible, lesson papers and birthday ribbons into a bundle. All this she clutched with her left hand and held to her chest with her forearm. She paused a moment, then asked, "What am I going to tell your father?"

A shot of terror sped through my chest and fled into my face. Dad would sure skin me. And how could I tell her what to say - I couldn't imagine saying it myself? I stood dumb. Miss Bauman was marching out the door.

Linda didn't tell. Neither did Connie; perhaps she hadn't noticed. But I spent some time sliding my unscathed butt and thighs across the contours of the heavy, varnished pew. And I spent more squirming in the vinyl-covered kitchen chair at dinner. In between things were all right - I could almost forget about it.

Aberhart finished preaching early. Dust particles faintly swirled, suspended in the stale air and illuminated in that certain slant of light. We sang "Rock of Ages" and all the adults and young people and a few of the kids (like Barbara) took communion. Communion Sundays were always best because the service left most of the congregation feeling slightly officious. That meant lingering conversations in the foyer and out on the sidewalk - and more time to play. Usually only the men stood talking on the sidewalk. The slick surface on the concrete was breaking away in shaley chunks, leaving a rocky and uneven path. The low-heeled ankle boots that most of the men wore could easily accommodate this pebble but the ladies high-heeled shoes were less agreeable. So the ladies gathered on the square and sound step of the church and chatted in the brilliant sun and light noon air of late summer - and glanced occasionally over at the men in case it was time to go - or should be - and eventually sauntered in that direction along the strip of brittle grass between the sidewalk and the street.

The odd grasshopper clicked and whirred, the odd blackbird fluted and one or two gophers cheeped in nearby fields. A group of girls stood around a corner of the church on the field rocks that bordered the narrow pond constructed between the church and the parsonage. A few stood on the tiny bridge across which Aberhart made his escape after service and a few stood on the moist grass in the

shade between Aberhart's short caragana hedge and the tattered sidewalk. They stroked the satin marker ribbons that hung from their white Bibles or bent to brush the dust from their saddle shoes and one or two pulled at their knee-high socks. They talked of palomino horses and Barbie clothes and sometimes of older girls who wore makeup.

A string of boys trailed off behind the houses that lined the street to throw rocks or hear a new dirty joke. A band of younger boys bounded up the street and skidded their oxfords and ankle-boots through the dust, marking the ambient murmur of gentle rural folk with a yip or a yell.

Shirley had been known to frequent these groups but today she parked herself sullenly in the back seat of her father's Pontiac. Her father stood with Darrel, her brother, who was home from school in Saskatoon for the weekend to help his father with the combining. Darrel shifted his weight from foot to foot and pushed absently at a loose cookie of polished concrete. Three or four other farmers lolled with them, rolling a stalk of grass between thick fingers or stuffing their leathery hands into the pockets of their suit pants. One was missing the tip of the middle finger on his left hand and another's index finger had a nail that was black and about to fall off. With the exception of Darrel, they all had that semi-circular profile that ran from chest to groin and seemed best suited in combination overalls. The conversation was less about power take off units than about Aberhart's message but eventually drifted around to projected yields for this year's harvest. A brackish-voiced man called, "Ross, I don't want you over at the Chink's, now."

The "Chink's" was one of two stores in town, besides the Co-op, but Hubbard's was closed Sundays. They went to the Anglican church in Assiniboia. Mr. Lam's had a restaurant out front and, though we were forbidden to spend our allowance money on a Sunday, it was rumoured that you might catch a glimpse of the infamous Jerry Dachs, cloaked in a diabolical hangover, in there on a Sunday morning.

Ross was half a block shy of the "Chink's" at a vacant lot which garter snakes were known to inhabit and where we listened to the big protestant expound the fortunes of having his big brother home for the weekend. His brother was nineteen, rode a five hundred pound motorcycle and lived in Regina. And he had brought along a new cuss word: prick. When their father had begun snarling about the old International, he had said, "Don't get your prick in the spokes, dad," and had proceeded to adjust the clutch so that the truck not only started better but didn't jam the hoist neither.

Kenny should have been listening to the account of the various death throes displayed by the dozens of gophers which the objector and the subject sibling had dispatched the day before. The younger wasn't allowed to use the .22 and usually had to settle for bruising the varmints with his BB gun. With his brother, not only had he been allowed the .22 but the cool one had brought a box of .22 long mushroom bullets. These could inflict awesome devastation. One gopher had been blasted in two from off of a rock. But Kenny wanted to talk about his dream.

We knew each other, often visited each other. So Kenny told me, told me that he dreamed that he was supposed to feed a dog that was in a doghouse. But when he put the food down by the door, the big dog jumped out and tried to bite him. And then more dogs started coming out and they were all growling and snapping their teeth. And then they started to chase him. He ran and ran and they were all barking and running after him. He kept running but he got really tired and so he turned around. They were really mad and scary and all their hair was standing up and he was going to turn around and run again but then there was a slippery wall behind him that he couldn't see but he could feel it with his heels if he tried to run backwards. So he stayed looking at the dogs and the dogs didn't have collars on but they had necklaces with jewels and gold pieces. They were still really mad and really close. And that was the end.

Kenny's story roused a flicker of remembrance and some of the dream which had accompanied my waking returned to me. I said, "I dreamed about Ranger," and Kenny moved to stand directly in front of me and peered into my face. Kenny was different. "I was running beside Ranger and I could run just as fast as he could. We ran past the whole pasture and up the road through the south field and we both ran right across the field and all the way to Grandma's old place. We both just ran right past the old place and just stopped and Ranger started to dig. He dug so fast that I couldn't see his paws, just the hole getting bigger. And Ranger was bobbing up and down and digging like crazy and kicking. Dirt was flying out the back like a badger. And then mom woke me up and put my church clothes on the bed."

Kenny stood still and stared. A meadowlark went through its musical convulsions and Kenny seemed suddenly alerted to the lanky grass of the lot we were standing in and to the hunter and the others. I noticed the cow-lick in his crew cut just left of centre at his hair line and how it looked like a funnel into his head. Bright-eyed, he spoke: "It *is* Shirley's dog. It's like treasure. It's like treasure in a pirate show." All of us had seen pirate movies - on TV - movies were exorcised by television transmission. But I couldn't find out what he meant. While the very good hunter continued on about how excellent hunter and his dad had had a beer for breakfast while he, his mother, and his sister Ally waited for their ride to Sunday school with the Maxwells, Kenny walked right over to Miller's Pontiac. Shirley was sitting in the lucent red cavity of the big black car and stared at the front seat-back, even when Kenny walked up and stood at the open window. She was feeling betrayed; she had troubled herself to do all the right things and had been rewarded with a broken, weak and faithless appeal for poor Scamp. The young men were beginning to leave in their hand-me-down half-tons and Kenny knew that the families would soon be hopping into their Mercurys and Pontiacs and roaring home to their chicken dinners. Lloyd Hicks had started his old Ford and the Baumans were loading up the Studebaker. Under Lloyd's truck, a blast of air stirred the dust furiously but as he pulled out and whined away slowly down the street, it rolled out gently in lazy little spirals. Stella Miller had just said good-bye to Lloyd and was walking carefully up the street in her brand-new high heels. He had to get it said. He peered in the window. "Shirley...Shirley." She turned her stern face and fixed a piercing look on him. The bright daylight caused

the chrome rain gutter above the window to gleam with spears of silver and steel blue and pale purple so that it appeared as if she sat wearing a tiara. A deep, churning throb had crept into the background and a train sounded a long and a short blare as it approached the road into town. He steeled himself and said quickly, "When you look for Scamp it's like a treasure. Scamp is the treasure and it's like a treasure map with an X or a diamond marked on it." He couldn't have been more serious. Stella had rounded the back of the car and was approaching the back door on the far side. To Stella these days, everything was a romance and she could hardly believe what she was seeing. She took in the scene at one gulp and it was with amusement dancing in her eyes that she said, "Hell-lo, Kenny," and climbed into the car. How could he continue? Shirley's intense look softened slightly after a moment and she said, "OK. Thanks, Kenny." Kenny tried to stand as straight as he could and had no desire to walk the gauntlet of men along the sidewalk so he strode with deliberation around the back of the car and along the street towards the boys in the snake lot. Down the long slope of the street to the edge of town, Kenny could see the train rolling up to the sharp brown elevators where they sprung from the green and blonde. From where he walked he could only read the word POOL. But he knew that on the front was emblazoned SASKATCHEWAN NO.22 SHIRLEY.

After dinner, Wally Miller got in his pickup and drove out to the west section to check his combine. Shirley was out of sorts again. Darrel would soon be leaving and, despite mother's ingenuity, there was no occupation which she couldn't

poison. At last everyone sat silently in the living room while Shirley pouted at the table.

Wally came back, walked straight to the bathroom and began washing his hands. "Darrel", he called, "I just seen a skunk down at the south granaries. He'll be in the chickens by morning." Everyone had started stirring anyway and Darrel marched to the back porch and grabbed the Cooey out of the closet. Rumour - and the excellent hunter - had it that if you shot a skunk with a shotgun slug, it couldn't spray. He dumped a few .22 longs into his shirt pocket and was out the door. But he hopped into his old Chevrolet Apache to travel the two hundred yards or so to the south end of the yard. You can wash a truck. At the slamming of the truck door, Shirley declared, "I'm goin' with Darrel." Nobody was willing to take up the struggle again and the lack of resistance stood as her sanction.

Darrel was silent as Shirley plopped herself down on the seat and readied herself for his question. He picked up the gun from where it lay against the seat with its butt on the tin floor and set it in the rack above the seat-back, then backed out between the hedges and drove down to the granaries. They parked on the path, which ran about thirty yards out from the row, and in front of the two centre bins, one of which had a license plate on the door.

Darrel shifted in his seat. His back had stiffened up since his fall on Friday night. He had spent that entire day standing in registration line-ups, then breezed the big Parisienne all the way home at about eighty-five. That was a cool ride and he had arrived invigorated. But by the time he had pulled into the yard with the last load for the day, it was dusky and fatigue hung on him. Of course, Scamp was glad to

see him and bounded and lunged around the lumbering truck like a cutting horse as he drew up to the row of granaries along the south side of the yard. He walked up the ridge to the west row, where the new metal bins stood, to fetch the auger. Scamp wobbled along at his side, the vigorous wag of her tail prohibiting any linear track as her hind paws sought purchase on the slick, baked dirt, the flat, brown grass or the odd "stinkberry" vine.

Darrel gripped the handle on the auger barrel and the strut that ran down to one of the wheels, lifted the far end off of the overturned hopper and heaved on the strut. Obstinately, the auger rolled out from between the bins and he swung the long tube around to point down the ridge at the truck and the row of red granaries to the south. Rather than setting the hopper-end of the auger down, walking around, picking it up and pulling the machine down the slope, then swinging the spout around to the granary, Darrel hauled down on the handle until he could hook his arm over the barrel and pushed the contraption down the slope. As he pressed he could lean on the barrel, counterbalancing the heavy engine, but as soon as the machine began running down hill, his lightened frame was no match for the auger's momentum. His feet danced on the slippery earth as they gained speed. He had to let the barrel up and dig his heels in before it ran away on him. He pushed down hard on the barrel, then let it go and snatched at the handle as it swung upwards. He caught it but the long tube continued its swing until the hopper end nearly touched the ground. Darrel was fairly hanging from the barrel with his arm stretched out and his feet thrust forward under the axle. As he skidded, the carriage began to slow but they were still at some speed when his

boots bounced over the grooves in the path where the trucks frequently entered the yard. On the second bounce, his grip failed and he landed flat on his back on the path. He scrambled up just in time to see the carriage clear the back of the truck as the leading end of the auger arced downward and then the whole thing stopped with a brittle crunch as the protruding auger shaft punched through a slat inside the white rectangle that framed the granary door and just below the centre of the big white X of its diagonal bracing.

Scamp thought it was all great fun and darted and pranced around Darrel as he extracted the shaft from the wood. He walked to the toolshed and returned with a small pipe wrench and a hammer, repaired the bent auger blade, then swung that end around by the truck. Scamp had nosed right in to the repair site then jumped back in alarm as the hammer rang off of the wrench handle. She helped Darrel fetch the hopper, too.

Darrel swung the granary door open and latched it back. The little shack was empty except for the pile of planks which would dam the doorway - and a few mice, almost imperceptible in the gloom, which scattered along the sill where the walls met the rafters. Scamp ran along the walls, doubling back again and again and looking up at the sill while Darrel slid the planks into place and aligned the auger. Before installing the last two planks, he called, "Come on, Scamp." But Scamp only danced on the spot, looked his way, then back at the still. "Come on, Scamp." A twirl and more jittering but no compliance. "Scamp! Get out here!" She turned and bounded across the floor, then sprang over the three and one half feet or so of planking, stretching out into a fluid arc. But the little building was

raised about a foot off the ground and her landing was much less elegant. Her front legs folded under her and she nosed into the dirt. Scamp trotted around shaking her head and snorting and Darrel inserted the boards. He backed the truck up to the hopper, engaged the hoist and started the auger engine. He returned to the back of the truck, swung the tail-chute handle free and tapped on the handle until the flow of grain from the box was about equal to that clawed up by the auger. The grain fell into a neat cone in the grainery and a dimple was formed at the top so that it looked like a volcano with streams of golden lava bursting down its sides and augmenting its elevation. Fine grain dust rippled from the spout and began to drift around the bin. Darrel trudged around to the cab and lifted the hoist a bit, then returned to the tail-chute. He clasped the top edge of the box, stepped on the lip of the box-deck and swung himself up to look into the back. He hopped down, gave the chute handle a tap, shoved his hands into the pockets of his overalls and checked on the level in the hopper until he stood staring sightlessly at the seemingly static funnel.

Hardly visible through the gathering dust, a mouse darted to the edge of the sill, ran a few inches towards the door, then ran back, slipped off the edge, dangled for a moment and then dropped. Scamp sprinted the two or three paces to the doorway and extended herself to place her paws on the upper edge of the planking. A few hesitant bounces and one vigourous vault and she was scrambling over the boards and flipping into the grain. She galloped around the pile to where the mouse was scampering over the shifting grain and attempted to climb the pile after it. The mouse would tumble and the dog would lunge but the

terrified rodent seemed always just able to skitter clear. In a short time the dog was exhausted as the effects of the wheat dust squeezed off her air exchange. She began swimming in the suddenly unremitting tide of seed for her life, her very breath working to quench itself. As the pile reached the level of one of the two threaded rods that spanned the building high up on the walls, the mouse slid up against the iron, mounted the rod and scurried off to the sill. The dog was buried to her shoulders and could only muster a wiggle. The air in the bin was saturated with dust, the seed clutched her torso and she could make no sound.

Darrel had pulled the shovel from the side of the box and was leaning over the back scraping the last of the load into the hopper. He stuck the shovel back and while the hopper emptied, allowed the hoist to bleed down. He walked over to the little toolshed and looked around inside. He thought of knocking the end out of a wooden Fanta crate until he fixed on an old license plate hanging on the wall. He grabbed the plate, which read *1965 Diamond Jubilee*, and a handful of nails and lumbered back to the granary.

The hopper was empty. He killed the engine, it spun impotently to a halt, and suddenly only the burble of the truck engine remained. He parked the auger between the granaries and set the hopper under it. There was a wall of dust standing in the doorway and, haltingly, thin wisps wandered out as Darrel unhooked the door. A puff escaped as he swung it closed. He latched it and nailed the license plate over the broken slat. He had then taken the tools, climbed in the truck, turned on the lights and driven up to the hedge that surrounded the house.

Darrel took the gun down, chambered a shell and hung the barrel out his window. For a time they sat quietly. Things seemed to awaken around them, around their stillness. A trickle of breeze meandered through the cab and the leaves in the poplars all waved in waves, painting a shiny ripple against their own dark mantle. Not to be outdone, a grasshopper clunked down on the hood and skidded to a halt, then donned its own picturesque display as it stretched out black and yellow wings of satin tissue before folding them into its dust-coloured keep. The brilliant light turned down as a cloud passed then sprang back up. A blue-green cowbird dropped down in front of a granary and walked as if it were testing the water with its toe at each step. Shirley said, "When you were working on the railroad this summer and I got lonely, Daddy used to take me for a ride in your truck." A gopher sped across the path to the west, skipped with its front feet in the air, then continued running towards the metal bins, then halted. Another gopher raced out of the shadow on the north side of the first bin and they ran paralleling each other with manic starts and turns and regularly scheduled stops. "Now I won't have you and I can't find Scamp and I won't even be able to go in the truck." Darrel hung his hand over the old worn steering wheel.

There was a movement under the edge of the granary with the license plate. A nose poked out, then ducked back in. A few moments later a head appeared. A few more and the skunk waddled out and stopped, rooting its nose back and forth through the short grass. It waddled a short distance towards the path, sauntered under the building and back out again. Shirley pointed out Darrel's window. The

skunk lifted its head and made little bobbing motions with its nose as it turned its head slightly towards the path. And Darrel ripped a bullet through its throat.

It wasn't the dream, it wasn't just the dream, no, that wasn't it; but the Old Man('s Stetson), Ma('s ribbons), Limerick's Mary… that brought me to this.